

**Centre for Human Rights Education**

**From Kingdom to Elitdom: Tradition and the Question of Relevant  
Education in Ethiopia**

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## **STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP**

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

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## **DEDICATION**

This study is humbly dedicated to the teachers of the Ethiopian Traditional Education System who are the living fountains of indigenous knowledge in the country. They preserve, interpret, and teach the great wisdom of the ages to the next generation without material return to their services.

It is also dedicated to my precious twin daughters Mihret Yirga Gelaw and Selam Yirga Gelaw.

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## ABSTRACT

This study is a rigorous and critical analysis of the significance and relevance of tradition to modern education in Ethiopia. It challenges the Eurocentric view that considers non-western traditions as backward by showing the traditional legacy of the country. The study analyses textual and empirical sources to interpret the values and principles that enabled Ethiopians to maintain political and social cohesion, independence from European colonialism, and indigenous methods of knowledge production for several centuries. The study shows how consciousness of western political power developed among Ethiopian political leaders, who at the dawn of the 20th century introduced formal education by copying it from western sources in order to modernise the state. The imitation of western institutions and legal and educational systems with complete disregard to Ethiopian tradition gave rise to student radicalism and state violence especially during the period of the Derg. Taking the above analytical finding as a context, the study further analyses the effect of the western education system on the lives of current Ethiopian students. It concludes that Ethiopian students experience a deep sense of alienation from tradition and from the modernist system in the country, which is elitdom. Alienation from tradition is experienced largely due to the development of Eurocentric worldview through western education. Students develop a sense of detachment from their communal identities based on the belief that their tradition was antithetical to modernisation. Alienation from elitdom is experienced as students are unable to realise the promises of education through the current education system. Low quality education, failure to join university or graduate from it, the use of foreign language as a medium of instruction and the difficulty of finding employment contribute to alienation from elitdom. The study argues that the two forms of alienation, presented in the study as centredlessness, represent the effect of the exclusion of tradition from education.

The study employed critical ethnography as a methodology and used observation, interview and archival data analysis as principal research methods. The empirical data was primarily gathered from two traditional schools, two high schools and one university.

## **LIST OF ACRONYMS**

ADLI	Agricultural Development Led Industrialisation
CSA	Central Statistical Agency
EC	Ethiopian Calendar
ECMY	Ethiopian Evangelical Church, Mekane Eyesus
EPLF	Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRDM	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Movement
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
ESR	Education Sector Review
ETP	Education and Training Policy
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
GEQAP	General Education Quality Assurance Package
GTP	Growth and Transformation Plan
HPR	House of People's Representatives
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOEFA	Ministry of Education and Fine Arts
QEAP	General Education Quality Assurance Package
TPLF	Tigray Peoples Liberation Front
TVT	Technical and Vocational Training

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

*We do not live in space, we live in places. To live is to live locally, and to know is first of all to know the places one is in.*  
(Casey, 1996, p. 18).

#### 1.1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about the relationship between tradition and education. It tries to understand the circumstances through which western educated individuals claim intellectual, political, and social leadership over a society they barely study during their education. I am one of those students who passed through an education system that bypassed many of what the elders in my community and country have known about tradition. I studied legal codes and philosophies, predominantly copied from western sources, in English, in order to apply them later in Amharic. I am not referring to traditions as missed narrations about bare events and occurrences in the past, or rules and procedures of communal rituals. Instead, tradition is that social faculty with which we sense the world and act upon it (Eliot, 1982). From this perspective, a missing tradition is a missing link situated not in the past but in the present. It is the avatar of emotions, sentiments, feelings, and convictions that help create and maintain a sense of connection with people who currently practice those traditions. To practice daily life with a sense of participating with others in a legacy of convenient traditions, to imagine the self as an equal element in the process of realising an imagined and glorious destiny, in short, to have a place – a sense of social centre in society – is an important aspect of tradition to which education could have made indispensable contribution.

This chapter provides general contextual information about Ethiopia, a brief literature review on the question of relevant education in Ethiopia, and the objectives of the research. It also provides a brief explanation of the key terms used in the study and the methodology followed.

### ***1.1.1. Background Information on Ethiopia***

Ethiopia has many diverse topographical, climatic, linguistic, and religious features. Geographically, Ethiopia is located within the hot zone. Its southern tip is only 30 degrees north of the equator. However, due to its high altitude, the country has a predominantly moderate climate with an average temperature in its vast central highland plateaus no more than 20°C (68°F). The Great East African Rift Valley traverses the central highland plateau into the north-west and south-east highlands. The majority of the population lives in scattered villages in the highlands as farmers and pastoralists. The three popular indigenous foodstuff plants, *teff* (*Eragrostis teff*), *nug* (*Guizotia abyssinica*), and *enset* (*Edulis edule*) have been cultivated since at least the 5th millennium BC (Pankhurst, 2005, p. 13). The highlands are surrounded by lowlands, the largest part of which lies on the south-eastern side adjacent to Somalia. The Ethiopian Rift Valley has about 22 lakes and rich species of fauna and flora, especially birds. The north eastern side of the country has one of the world's hottest places, the Dallol Depression, at 130 meters below sea level. This can be contrasted to the cold peak of Mount Ras Dashan in the central highlands at 4543 meters above sea level. The significant variation in altitude has created three distinct types of climate in the country. These include *kolla* (tropical zone), *woyina dega* (subtropical zone) and *dega* (cold zone). These variations support diverse vegetation and wildlife.

Anthropological sources suggest that Ethiopia is the possible cradle of humankind (Hilton-Barber & Berger, 2004). The Lower Omo Valley and the Awash Valley of Ethiopia are World Heritage Sites registered by UNESCO for their archaeological and paleontological sources. In 1974, fragments of bones believed to be parts of the skeleton of *Australopithecus Afarensis* were found in the Hadar valley of the Afar region. Archaeologists believe 3.2 million years ago, the Afar valley was inhabited by the earliest hominids. This discovery created a sense of cradle which appears to resonate with the country's ancient civilized history.

Ancient Egyptians referred to Ethiopia as the land of Punt, a place of frequent visits by the gods, and a source and destination of expeditions by the Pharaohs (Pankhurst, 2005, p. 15). Queen Hatshepsut (1501-1479 BC), and successive Pharaohs

made expeditions to Ethiopia, and Ethiopians made similar expeditions to Egypt. Greek authors had many stories to tell about Ethiopia. Homer described the people as the “blameless Ethiopians”, who were loved by the gods, and the “high souled Ethiopians” who were the children of the almighty son of Koronos (Snowden, 1983, p. 46). Herodotus provided more detailed account about Ethiopia in the 5th century BC. According to Herodotus, Ethiopians were people who lived by the streams of the Nile worshipping the gods. They were “the tallest and handsomest men in the whole world” and “longer lived than anywhere else” (Herodotus, 440 B.C.E.).

The above portrayal of Ethiopia as a place loved by the Greek gods resonates with the country’s similar representation in the Judaic and Christian books of the Bible. Biblical writings portray Ethiopia as a land surrounded by the river Giyon that watered the Garden of Eden as described in Genesis 2, 2. According to Psalm, Chapter 68 verse 31, “Ethiopia stretches out her hands unto God”. In the Book of Amos, Chapter 9, Verse 7, Israelites were considered as God’s children as much as the Ethiopians were. Various other sources depict Ethiopia as a place of significance in olden times. The visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon of Israel as stated in the first Book of Kings 10 led to one of the most influential stories to describe the messianic destiny of Ethiopia. The details of this story are elaborated in the Ethiopian book of the Kebra Nagast which is one of the analytical sources of this study (Chapter Three). The history of ancient Ethiopian civilisation that was mentioned in these and many other texts has been targeted by supporters of the Eurocentric perspective of history that denied Africa a share of its historical existence in the world (Hegel, 1856). However, few Ethiopian scholars have shown the absurdity of the thesis of the alien origin of Ethiopian civilisation based on historical and other evidences (Bekerie, 1997; Isaac, 2013; Kebede, 2003a).

In addition to the arguments of the scholars, physical evidence of ancient civilisation abounds in Ethiopia where archaeological sources uncovered stone inscriptions and ruined palaces that date back to the 10th century BC are still visible at Yeha. The symbolic height of Ethiopia’s civilization was epitomised in the erection of more than 140 obelisks at Axum and the surrounding area which are estimated to date as far back as 1st millennium BC. Although the largest obelisk at the height of about 33

meters high has since collapsed, Richard Pankhurst (2005, p. 32) argues that it is “a strong candidate as the largest single monolith which humans have ever proceeded to erect”. In addition to stone inscriptions and obelisks, Ethiopia was one of the earliest countries to mint coins from gold, silver and bronze for internal and external trade. From King Endubis (270 AD) to King Armah (630 AD), twenty kings inscribed their names and effigies into coins. They also inscribed important victories and mentioned religious gratitude on stones using the Geez, Sabaeen and Greek languages (Pankhurst, 2005, p. 36).

The introduction of Christianity is one of the most influential events in the history of Ethiopia. It is believed that the Axumite King Ezana was converted into Christianity around 330 AD. But the news of Christianity might have reached the country much earlier than that time (Isaac, 2013, p. 17-18). The Ethiopian Orthodox Church became the ideological and intellectual source of statehood in the country. Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Christianity developed with the arrival of nine monks in 480 AD who are said to have greatly assisted in the translation of numerous books including the Bible into Geez (Isaac, 2013, p. 21). Islam was introduced in 615 AD when the earliest disciples of the Prophet Mohammad escaped prosecution in Mecca and took refuge in Axum.

With the expansion of Islam and Ottoman dominance in Arabia, Ethiopia's Axumite dynasty declined around the 10th Century AD, and was replaced by the Zagwe Dynasty which was centred near the historic town of Lalibela. The Zagwe period was the most peaceful and prosperous time of the country that left numerous yet untranslated historical evidence behind despite modern historians referring to the Zagwe as the “Dark Age” (Negash, 2003). It could also be that the rich intellectual resources of the period were destroyed by the succeeding Solomonic Dynasty (Heldman, 1992). Negash (2003) considers ideological motives for this neglect. King Lalibela, who epitomised the European legendary persona of Prestor John, built monolithic churches from a single rock to create a “New Jerusalem” in Ethiopia. The Zagwe architectural legacy witnesses a continuous and refined stage of civilization in the country (Buxton, 1970). Zagwe declined and was replaced by what is commonly known as the Restored Solomon Dynasty in about 1270.

The Restored Solomon Dynasty saw various upheavals such as the war of Ahmed Gragn, the great Oromo movement, the establishment of Gondar as the new Capital, the decline of Gondar and the rise and fall of Tewodros II, the battle of Adowa, and the period of Haile Selassie. The European colonial policy towards Africans and the dominance of Islamic power encircling the country made Ethiopia an isolated “Christian island” in the region. The period starting from the rise of Tewodros IV to power in 1855 is considered to be the modern period in Ethiopia. During this time, the power of Europe gained a significant political consideration in the minds of Ethiopian leaders (Tubiana, 1965). The British sent a successful expedition to free their citizens from Tewodros II in 1888, Menelik II fought Italians at the Battle of Adowa in 1896, the first western school was opened in 1908, Italians invaded Ethiopia in 1935, and the Addis Ababa University was founded in 1950. These and many other related historical events brought the military and ideological power of Europe into the Ethiopian political matrix, and a consciousness of a world dominated by European superiority gained momentum among the leading intelligentsia of the country. The beginning of this development is regarded in this study as the birth of consciousness of power which was marked by the death of Tewodros II on April 13, 1868 at Maqdella (Chapter Five). Western education started in Ethiopia under the influence of this consciousness in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

### ***1.1.2. Education and the question of relevance in Ethiopia***

In this subsection, I will present the general literature related to the question of relevant education in Ethiopia, and identify the key gaps that will be addressed in this study. First, there is a general lack of critical study in the field of education in Ethiopia. However, studies conducted on education and related fields highlighted the internal chaos and crisis that has been unfolding within the education system (Asgedom et al., 1998; Assefa, 2008; Negash, 1996, 2006; Wagaw, 1990). This crisis has been explained from structural, ideological, and other perspectives. Considering the existing literature, the question of relevance in education may be regarded from two vantage points. The first perspective questions the relevance of the western model of education and its ideological and practical implications for the historical and cultural specificity of



Ethiopian society. Second, the relevance of processes, programs and activities within education could be questioned in light of their pertinence to the quality or strength of the existing education system. In the second case, the western model of education is taken for granted as a relevant form of education for the country, but the management and administration of the system is considered to be an area of concern. This latter concern over the system is the dominant topic of existing research, and relevance is often regarded with other issues such as the quality of the education system that is generally considered as poor and in crisis (Asgedom, et al., 1998). The question of relevance in this study focuses on the first perspective. However, the various findings within the second aspect of relevance will be considered to provide interpretative insights to the first.

One of the most comprehensive studies on the development of higher education in Ethiopia was conducted by Teshome Wagaw (1990). Wagaw considered how higher education developed in the country during the period of Haile Selassie and Derg. He identified the origin of education in Ethiopia in the 4th century AD when Ethiopia's Axumite Kingdom accepted Christianity. From that time forward, a traditional education system developed with its own texts, philosophy, and hierarchy of studies from lower to higher levels (Wagaw, 1990). Although the entire education system has strong religious themes, the higher level of study focused on the training of *dabtaras*— highly qualified traditional scholars versed in religious and secular matters. Wagaw highlighted how the traditional education system was replaced with the “guest models” with the opening of western education that contained foreign curriculum, system of administration, and teachers. The system has since faced enormous challenges against which it continued to adapt itself until the twentieth century (Wagaw, 1990, p. 31).

Wagaw (1990) noted historical factors that influenced Ethiopian leaders to copy the western model of education. Since its military victory over Italy at Adwa in 1896, Ethiopia as the only African independent country attracted European diplomatic interest and was later accepted into the League of Nations. This membership into the “civilised” nations of that time created the desire to meet European standards whereby Ethiopian students would be sent out to western institutions abroad, and European modern

institutions would be imitated with complete disregard for the social, political and cultural context of the country.

Similarly, Balsvik (1985, p. 9-11) noted that the education system was a “foreign transplant” copied from Britain, the United States and other countries. The colleges and universities were staffed by European, Canadian, and American teachers with the Emperor himself assuming the portfolio of a Minister of Education at the top. Her study focused on the development of a new consciousness among Haile Selassie’s students that led to a revolution that overthrew the monarchy. Her ethnographic study shows that Addis Ababa University was a place of gaining a new political consciousness and identity for students more than it was a place of learning technical skills to serve the state.

Messay Kebede (2008a) considered Balivisk’s (1985) ethnographic study and student publications of the 1960s and drew a different conclusion. According to Kebede, the view that western education served to enlighten the minds of Ethiopian students to realise the oppressive nature of the monarchical regime is indefensible. Instead, the education system predisposed the students to a progressive radicalization process that made them regard the political system and the tradition of the people as backward and antagonistic to modernisation. Although Wagaw (1990) and Balivisk (1985) noted the influence of internal factors such as unemployment, backward customs and corruption as leading causes of dissatisfaction, Kebede strongly argued that indoctrination with and ideological commitment to Marxism-Leninism was the major factor for the radicalisation of the students. Ethiopian students became unwilling to negotiate with the government or accept its concessions. They believed that the monarchical system could never be reformed to become a positive force for the modernisation of the country. Kebede (2008a, p. 4) argues the students capitulated to this radical belief due to “cultural dislocation” which was precipitated by their Eurocentric education. He argued, “[h]aving a clear colonial character, the education system disseminated a theoretical construct that opposed modernity to tradition, thereby squarely putting the blame for Ethiopia’s technological lag on its traditions” (Kebede, 2008a, p. 191).

Once tradition was equated with backwardness, the remedy proposed was not the reformation of tradition but the eradication of it, and the total conversion to the

European model of society. While Kebede emphasises this alienating effect of western education, Wagaw (1990, p. 205) argued that “alienation and dissatisfaction from home” was the main cause of intergenerational conflict. It can be noted that both authors are concerned with the effect of the separation of Ethiopia’s tradition from education although they did not define what constitutes tradition and how it can be used in the process of education.

In an earlier study, Kebede (1999) gave a better insight into the meaning of tradition. He regards modernisation as a process of reforming traditions. For example, he presented the historical significance of the Kebra Nagast as a source of national ideology that mobilised Ethiopians to protect the independence of their country as a chosen nation of God (Kebede, 2008a, p. 51). He also emphasised the need to return to tradition and noted the validating power of culture for development (2008b). To some extent, Kebede viewed the Ethiopian tradition as complicit with the radicalisation of the students. He argued that when Ethiopian students became alienated from their tradition, they substituted the “Solomonic myth” of the Kebra Nagast with the radical ideology of Marxism-Leninism because both ideologies have a similar effect of ascribing messianic identity to their believers (Kebede, 2008a, p. 113). Ethiopian students capitulated easily to Marxist-Leninist ideology due to the well accepted tradition of the country that allows leaders to assume messianic responsibilities towards the people. But this view appears to be incompatible with the suggestion that returning to tradition is the best way to begin a process of modernisation (Kebede, 1999). There is some level of temporal limitation with Kebede’s (2008a) critical study on the role of Ethiopian elites as he based his findings on the events that took place between 1960 and 1974. However, there are important historical events that have occurred since 1974 that have affected the process of education. The practice of repeated state violence against dissent has altered the ability of Ethiopian students to effect political concessions as a unified voice in the country (Abbink, 1995). The students who had lost political leadership to the military junta in 1974 seized political power by military means in 1991. Since then, significant changes have been introduced, including the division of the country into ethnic regions, and the introduction of a new Education and Training Policy (ETP) that reflects this new ruling elite’s ideology. Although Kebede’s study is significantly relevant today, it does

not consider the effect of these major historical factors. This study seeks to extend research into this latter period.

ETP's educational assumptions and its structural and other types of links with other systems and ideas have not been a subject of critical study. Tekeste Negash (1996, 2006) is one of the main critics of this policy. Unlike Kebede, who focused on the ideological irrelevancy of western education in Ethiopia, Negash emphasised the development of structural crisis in the Ethiopian education system, and the need for policy readjustments to address it. In an earlier publication, Negash (1990) observed that the study of history in high schools could undermine nation building in Ethiopia due to the lack of sufficient content on the study of Ethiopian history and traditions thereby limiting the awareness of students about their country's past legacy. In another study, Negash (1996) divided the Ethiopian education system into formal and non-formal education. While "formal education is a hierarchically structured and chronologically organised system extending from primary school to the university", non-formal education is "defined as any education activity organised outside the established formal system designed to serve identifiable groups with identifiable educational objectives" (Negash, 1996, p. 28). Negash argued that the formal education system is irrelevant to the culture of the rural population which are the majority. "For education to be relevant it ought to be built on a profound appreciation of the cultural heritage of the people and communities to whom it is directed" (Negash, 1996, p. 12).

Although the study mentioned traditional and cultural irrelevancy, it uses economic and developmental grounds more than cultural and philosophical grounds to argue against the formal education system. Negash (1996, p. 12) argued, "[i]n the Ethiopian context, the strategic foundation for the development of the society ought to be the production and distribution of food" (Negash, 1996, p. 12). This objective cannot and will not be met through the unabated expansion of the formal education system into the rural areas. Therefore, the government should divert its funding priority to the non-formal education sector to meet the specific needs of the rural population. This proposal would result in the existence of two types of education in the country to function side by side with different educational outcomes. The formal education system would serve the urban and manufacturing oriented social group while non-formal education would be

organised as a need based training activity to benefit the rural population (Negash, 1996). Given the general neglect of Ethiopian scholars of the role of tradition in modern education, Negash's proposal is one of the most concessional arguments forwarded in the field. However, given the prevalence of Eurocentric concepts embedded in the formal education system, the division between urban and rural education may have the effect of naturalising superiority of the formal over the informal system.

Negash (2006, 2010) emphasised that the crisis of education in Ethiopia is largely self-initiated. It is driven by the use of the wrong policies including the use of English as a medium of instruction (Negash, 2006, 2010). He argued that the abandonment of English as a medium of instruction is "the precondition for the modernisation of the Ethiopian society" (2006, p. 52). This is a logical recommendation. However, the study does not suggest the reason behind the historic failure of the country to use its own language for higher education. As will be indicated in this study, the recommendation to use the national language as a national medium of instruction had been made to Emperor Haile Selassie (Work, 1934). The Education Sector Review (ESR) of 1972 had plans to use the national language as a medium of learning, and it had plans to expand non-formal education to the rural population (MOEFA, 1973, p. 13-25). However, the plan was strongly rejected by Ethiopian elites who made the ESR one of their rallying causes to initiate the 1974 revolution (DeStefano & Wilder, 1992, p. 11).

International donors such as USAID, SIDA, ADEA, and World Bank play significant roles in education in Ethiopia (Martin, Riitta Oksanen, & Takala, 2000; Yizengaw, 2005, p. 23-25). However, there is little critical study on the strategic link between the function of these donors in Ethiopia and the interests of the places that are primarily served by these institutions. For example, the World Bank has been criticised for colonising the African mind by forcing governments to adopt policies and structural adjustments that would serve its own long term financial interests (Brock-Utne, 2000 ). However, Negash (1996, p. 62) accepts the role of the World Bank as a key player in Ethiopia's education but refrains from discussing the effect of the Structural Adjustment Programs other than recognising that Ethiopia has been an "adjustee". He supported the diversion of donor funding to non-formal education without a critical investigation of

the ideological and material interests of these funders. It should be noted that despite the long term and deep involvement of donors and lenders in the education system, the role of these actors has not been adequately understood in light of the chronic failures of education in the country.

One of the common limitations of the critical literature discussed so far is the lack of the in-depth understanding and appreciation of the meaning of tradition, and its relevance to knowledge in general and education in particular. Tradition is understood instrumentally: it is presented as a resource at best and as a hindrance at worst for modernisation or progress. It is also viewed through western epistemological lenses (Korten, 1972). Despite this disregard, there are few studies produced based on the interpretation of Ethiopian tradition. A good example of such sources is Claude Sumner's five volumes of work on Ethiopian philosophy (Kiros, 1996; Sumner, 1976). Although Sumner's work is not specifically on education, his interpretation of Ethiopian philosophy stands out as an important contribution. Another example on Ethiopian sources of knowledge is Ephraim Isaac's study on the contributions and potentials of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church (1967 1971; 2013). Although these sources are not specifically focused on education, they can be used to examine the relevance of education to Ethiopia's tradition. This study draws upon such relevant sources on Ethiopian tradition and empirical evidence that occurred in Ethiopia in its exploration of the relevance of tradition for modern education. It presents fresh perspectives to the argument that the removal of Ethiopian tradition in modern education is a fundamental reason for the failure of education to improve the lives of the majority in the country.

### ***1.1.3. Aim and Objectives of the Study***

The aim of this study is to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between education and tradition within the Ethiopian social and historical context. In particular, the study aims to explore the significance of tradition as a source of knowledge for education, and the consequence of imitating a foreign education system without due regard to its relevance to tradition. This approach gives rise to three interrelated objectives.

The first objective is to investigate the relevance of tradition to education. The study analyses the key principles of Ethiopia's indigenous ideology and traditional knowledge as a cultural context that helps to interpret the relevance of education to Ethiopia's national values and interests. The concern over tradition is not to defend the significance of tradition for its own sake, but to defend the people's rights to utilise their own traditions for the purpose of improving their lives through education. It is also based on the recognition of the relevance of tradition for the continuous improvement of society, and the significance of the lessons of the past for the challenges of the future (Eliot, 1982; Mbiti, 1969; Shils, 1971 ). This is especially important in Ethiopia where the lives of more than 85 per cent of the population depend on traditional knowledge and practice (Lefort, 2007). By showing the significance of tradition to past and present social and political life, the study evaluates the relevance of education from the perspectives and interest of the people in whose name education is practiced.

The second objective of the research is to understand the effect of the removal of tradition from education. Through the study of historical events that led to the rise of Eurocentrism in Ethiopia, it explores how western institutions were imported from abroad and what their impacts were in social and political life. In particular, based on Kebede's (2008a) study on student radicalism, this study focuses on the role of western education in the creation of a ruling system that excluded tradition from becoming a relevant source of education.

The third objective of the study is to explore the effect of the Eurocentric model of education on the social life of current Ethiopian students. Based on the historical development of Eurocentrism through education, it analyses how current policy and practice in education affects the lives of students in the country. In this regard, the study analyses the current ETP, and interprets the meanings that students give to their academic roles and social lives in relation to education, and their relationship with the system. Based on the findings, the study suggests a theoretical insight to better understand the relationship between tradition and education in the Ethiopian context and beyond.

#### ***1.1.4. Definition of key terms***

The key terms and concepts explained here are used under the various headings of the study. Although these are not the only conceptual terms used, I chose the following terms in order to suggest the theoretical perspective from where these terms are applied in the study.

#### ***Education***

There are two ways in which the term education is used in this study. The first relates to learning activities that are based on tradition, custom or religion, and local experiences often with no governmental involvement, certification, or formal evaluation. When the term education or school is used in this sense, I use qualifiers such as traditional, or spiritual, to denote this form of education. The second form is “a state organised or regulated institution of intentional instruction: it includes ‘formal and non-formal government training schemes, adult education, and the like’” (Levinson & Holland, 1996, p. 2). In this paper, I use the term education or school, without qualifiers, to refer to this form. This definition is used in a wider sense to apply to all institutions that follow either centrally organised curriculum in line with government regulations, or systems of studies significantly different from the knowledge and culture of the local community. Thus, missionary schools, or schools run by charities that follow the national curriculum or overseas curriculum, although not run directly by the government, are included in this second definition. The exploration of educational relevance in this thesis relates to this second definition of education.

#### ***Critical theory***

This study is informed by critical social theory which takes into account the specific historical relationships between Africa and the west. Critical theory is regarded as “a long tradition of intellectual rebellion in which rigorous examination of ideas and discourse constituted political challenge” (Thomas, 1993 ). As critical research, it seeks to uncover the process through which oppression in society is reproduced through systems of ideas and institutions of power (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Kincheloe &



McLaren, 2003; Thomas, 1993 ). From this theoretical perspective, it assumes that the type of knowledge produced and distributed through schools is determined not based on technical considerations alone, but more importantly, based on the interest of the groups that control the system. Hence, “the theories, policies, and practices involved in education are not technical. They are inherently ethical and political” (Apple, 1990). Based on this theoretical approach, education and education policy in this research is analysed in terms of its relationship to systems of power that construct rules, confer legitimacy and guide social action.

### ***Eurocentrism and Ethiocentrism***

Eurocentrism refers to Europe “as the world’s centre of gravity, [and] as ontological ‘reality’ to the rest of the world’s shadow” (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 2). As “the coloniser’s model of the world” (Blaut, 1993, p. 10), Eurocentrism bifurcates reality antagonistically and hierarchically, assigning values as belonging to either the west or the rest (Hobson, 2012). Eurocentrism has been the basis of western international theories for centuries (Wallerstein, 1997). Western education has been one of the vehicles through which Eurocentric ideas are spread to non-western places including Ethiopia. Ethiocentrism refers to the view of the world from the perspective of Ethiopia. It developed through the traditional education system of the country that promoted the idea of a covenant nation as rigorously analysed in Chapter Three. In this study, both Eurocentrism and Ethiocentrism are regarded as self-referential claims but with important distinction with each other. While the claim of Eurocentrism emphasises *space* oriented dominion over the world based on Europe’s superior *power* and knowledge, Ethiocentrism emphasises *place* oriented particularity in the world based on Ethiopia’s *uniqueness* as destined by the divine.

### ***Power***

Power is considered as the perception, exercise, deployment, or production of any form of psychological, physical, political, or intellectual influence over individuals, groups, entities, or courses of events. In particular, the link between power and knowledge is important (Foucault, 1979, p. 27). Although power may be regarded as

sovereignty whereby certain actors are viewed as “wielders of power” with the capacity to decide, control or intervene in social and political affairs, the emphasis on its relationship with knowledge leads significantly to the view of power as deployment and productive. Power as deployment focuses on the process of disciplining the subject using knowledge; its productive aspect focuses on the beliefs, attitudes, interests, practices, and other effects of power occurring as a result of deployment (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998, p. 16-19). Power is deployed through the knowledge of individuals and the practice of institutions to bring about its productive effects.

### *Consciousness of Power*

Consciousness of power is an important aspect of Eurocentric ideology that influences African political and social structures to follow western prescriptions. It refers to the condition of being influenced or directed towards conformity with the interest, expectation, or perspective of the west. It is a product of historical domination exerted over Africa through colonialism and neo-colonialism. Its effect on the minds of Africanist knowledge could be understood from Mudimbe who held that “[m]odern African thought seems somehow to be basically a product of the West. Moreover, since most African leaders and thinkers have received a western education, their thought is at the crossroads of western epistemological filiation and African ethnocentrism” (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 185). Consciousness of power creates a value orientation that evaluates the significance of local cultural practices based on their relationship to Eurocentric constructions. It is the ideological legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism primarily promoted through discourses and practices that take the west as the centre of political, economic, and cultural integration. The literature on the relevance of African education in Chapter Two shows the influence of consciousness of power on discourses about education in Africa.

The consideration of consciousness of power as a product of colonial discourse and practice presents a challenge in relation to Ethiopia. If colonialism was truly the conduit of consciousness of power into Africa that brought about western ideological and material domination, how did Ethiopia, the only African state that was not colonised, become one of the poorest Sub-Saharan African countries? This study sheds

light on this dilemma by exploring how the consciousness of power towards the west arose in Ethiopia.

### *Elitdom*

I use the term elitdom in this study to contextualise the system of political association where elitism is regarded as an imposition of alien cultural standards rather than emerging from tradition (Woldeyes, 2013). Earlier understandings of elitism associated the term with meritocracy as individual achievement was considered more important than family ties (Hartmann, 2004). Eventually, discussions about elitism reflected to a dualistic view of society as a binary of elites and non-elites, or elites and the masses. “In this debate, elite and mass represented two sides of the same coin: elite was the positive concept, mass the negative” (Hartmann, 2004, p. 5). Commonly, people award the status of being elite to those who are considered exceedingly knowledgeable or active in their own culture, politics, or economy. The elite tend to represent a class or group of people who are “smarter, harder working, more learned, more productive and harder to replace” (Henry III, 1994, p. 14). Shils (1960, p. 266) noted that in most Asian and African states, elites are disposed to act on behalf of the population, they advocate for change, call for the “dethronement of the rich and the traditionally privileged from their positions of pre-eminent influence”, and consider the diffusion of science to the masses as a means of changing society.

Despite the exogenous affinity between Ethiopian elites and the west, there is a similarity between the status of being an elite based on western knowledge, and the status of being “*liq*” or scholar based on Ethiopian traditional knowledge. The similarity arises from the Ethiopian cultural perspective which regards knowledge as a gift from a higher authority, and the learned person as worthy of being respected. For the ordinary individual, the learned person is a custodian of unquestionable knowledge. This similarity begets the view of elite status in Ethiopia as having the attributes of both traditional and modern features. Thus, the term elitdom is used to show the blending of meanings arising from both tradition and westernisation to describe the nature of political power that alienates students from their society through the process of

education. The term elitdom is used to describe the mixed attribute of the elite system in Ethiopia.

### ***Tradition***

Tradition is one of the most important concepts in this study. Generally, its usage can be divided into two opposing perspectives. The first perspective considers tradition in association with the past and as opposite to the modern (Clifford, 2004). The past is often viewed as embodied with limitations, and tradition as the morbid ritual that perpetuates those limitations. This view of tradition is associated with the Age of Enlightenment which is often understood as the triumph of human intellect over its earlier masters such as religion, and tradition (Outram, 1995). According to Karl Marx (Marx, 1979, p. 103) “[t]he tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living”. Enlightenment was regarded as a triumphant emergence from tradition by the use of reason and by having ‘the courage to use your *own* understanding’ (Schmidt, 1989, p. 296, original emphasis). Knowledge is to be discovered in the present with the living, not in the past among the dead. Instead of studying the histories and literatures of the “fathers”, Emerson wrote (2001, p. 27), “[w]hy shouldnot we also enjoy original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?”

The second perspective, which is followed in this study, opposes this definition of tradition. Jaroslav Pelikan (1984) argued that Emerson’s (2001) thesis had confused tradition with traditionalism. He argued that the two should be viewed separately. “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living” (Pelikan, 1984, p. 65). The consideration of tradition as traditionalism “gives tradition such a bad name” (Pelikan, 1984, p. 65). Pelikan draws evidence from the past arguing that the dichotomy Emerson had drawn between insight and tradition is historically inaccurate.

The growth of insight — in science, in the arts, in philosophy and  
theology — has not come through progressively sloughing off

more and more of tradition, as though insight would be purest and deepest when it has finally freed itself of the dead past. It simply has not worked that way in the history of tradition, and it does not work that way now. By including the dead in the circle of discourse, we enrich the quality of the conversation (Pelikan, 1984, p. 81).

It should be noted that the very possibility of criticising tradition could be taken as a process of development within that tradition itself. “Tradition is the creation of the future out of the past” (Glassie, 1995, p. 395). It can “vindicate itself by appropriating much of what its critics say” (Pelikan, 1984, p. 58). It is a principle and a means with which we can make sense of history (Rüsen, 2012). According to Eliot (1982, p. 37) “the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence;” it helps a writer achieve “simultaneous existence” with the literature of the world. Hence, tradition could become a platform for action and reflection, a context for dialogical praxis that values the experience of participants and encourages them to draw from the best aspirations of their society. In this sense, it becomes not just an inheritance from the past but also a product of labour (Eliot, 1982, p. 37).

In this study, tradition is viewed not as a wornout past, but as a suppressed present. It lives in the daily lives of priests, farmers and students who establish and maintain relationships with each other using traditionally valued practices. From this perspective, relevant education involves the process of improving traditions. This approach avoids the notion of essentialising traditions as fixed and immutable because romanticising tradition as pure and authentic is equivalent to considering them as primitive (Semail & Kincheloe, 1999, p. 22). With the above provisos in mind, in this study, I use tradition rather than culture since my study utilises a large amount of historical information related to each topic. I argue that tradition offers a sense of history to culture as it implies social roots for existing structures and practices.

In this study, although tradition and traditional legacy are used in a singular sense, the sources of Ethiopian tradition are not monolithic. There are numerous ethnic and cultural groups in the country that are not included in this research due to the

limitation of the scope of the research. In particular, the *Gada* system of the Oromo with its rich indigenous system of democratic tradition embodies a rich source of knowledge for the country (Legesse, 1973). This study does not include *Gada* and other systems. The Islamic tradition is also another important legacy of the country. All traditions and cultures in the country are equally valuable as rich sources of knowledge for education. However, the scope of this thesis is limited to the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahido* Church tradition which was the basis of the ideology of the Ethiopian state before 1974 (Isaac, 2013). The main reason for choosing the Orthodox tradition is due to the limitations of the scope of the study to cover all traditions. In addition, the Ethiopian Orthodox church provided the philosophy, education and the legitimacy of rule for statehood in Ethiopia for several centuries. However, the researcher hopes that this study will encourage further studies in similar traditions.

### ***Modernity***

Two approaches are considered in relation to the use of the term modernity. The first view, which is also the dominant view, regards modernity from the perspective of European or western literature and history. The second view regards modernity based on the historical experiences and cultural views of non-western places and traditions.

The European or western view of modernity stresses a set of beliefs that emphasises the emergence of a new age, a transition from paganism to Christianity (Jürgen Habermas & Ben-Habib, 1981); and the rise of “dualistic consciousness, a hierarchical vision of society, and a metaphysical idea of science” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 70). Escobar (2007, p. 181) suggested a temporal and spatial origin of modernity occurring during the seventeenth century north Europeans period of the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution. Jauss (2005, p. 332) argued that the term “*modern* marks the dividing line between that which is newly produced and that which the newly produced has sidelined, between what was still in yesterday and what is already out today”. Habermas (1987) emphasised the increasing rationalisation of the life world as a typical feature of modernity. The above literature associated modernity with the rise of science, industrialisation, democracy, capitalism, secularism,

rationalism, consumerism, and technology— all originating from Europe, and universalised to “all over the world today” (Berman, 1982, p. 15).

Berman (1982, p. 15) argued, “To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world — and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.” The goal of education viewed from this perspective makes little difference between modernization and westernisation. Modernity becomes the universalisation of western ideas all over the world. The term modern education is used to refer to the modelling of education and society using western blueprints. Currently, African education systems including the Ethiopian education system follow this dominant view of modernity as explained in Chapter Two and Seven.

While modernity is regarded as the historical, cultural, and political transformation of society in western countries, critics argue that many of these positive qualities are achieved at the expense of the colonisation, exploitation and oppression of non-western societies (Quijano, 2000). Mignolo (2011, p. 3) argues that modernity should be understood as coloniality – “a complex matrix of power that has been created and controlled by Western men and institutions from the Renaissance, when it was driven by Christian theology, through the late twentieth century and the dictates of neoliberalism”. From this perspective modernity for most non-western societies could be understood in terms of the struggle for decolonising oneself from the colonial and neo-colonial structures of power (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Viewed from this second view of modernity, education becomes modern when it focuses on the transformation of existing traditions primarily through internal reflection and dialogue, and secondarily through the creative incorporation of external achievements. This thesis criticises the first view of modernity, and supports the second view but also suggests a perspective that emphasises the understanding of modernity as a process of improving traditions

### ***Historical Event***

A historical event is an important concept that has special significance in this study. There have been controversies to locate the concept of the event either as a

historical or a sociological phenomenon (Sewell Jr, 2005). Depending on the intensity of the issues that gave rise to its occurrence, an event may or may not affect structures, practices, or social relationships to a noticeable degree. When the affective power of an event on social consciousness is too weak to trigger enduring changes in social relationships, it falls short of becoming historical. Sewell (1996, p. 3) argues that an event becomes a historical event when it “tends to transform social relations”. He argued, “[a] historical event, then, is (1) a ramified sequence of occurrences that (2) is recognised as notable by contemporaries, and that (3) results in a durable transformation of structures” (Sewell, 1996, p. 4). What is relevant here is the capacity of certain historical events to shape the course of history by leaving a recurring lesson that guides subsequent social practices. From this perspective, a historical event could be regarded as a socially articulated occurrence that influences consciousness towards enduring socio political orientations. Sewell placed emphasis on structural changes or social ruptures that might occur as a result of a historical event. However, such changes may not become sustainable unless the event affects the social consciousness of contemporaries more deeply. According to Abrams (1982, p. 195), “the challenge of an event is not a matter of grasping its concreteness but of apprehending, at an appropriate level of concreteness, the transition it signifies”. Thus, the event as a concrete happening gains its birth in the annals of history but continues to be appreciated in society through sociological analysis.

A definition of society that takes into account the interplay of networks of power allows the possibility of a historical event becoming a turning point in the history of a given society. I consider society as “constituted of multiple overlapping and intersecting socio-political networks of power” (Mann, 1986). Although this conception appears to provide little chance to define society in terms of categories such as identity, culture and history, it nevertheless considers networks of ideological, economic, military, and political power as capable of formulating a socio- political field or relationship. Taking into account the above points, I consider a historical event as a noticeable rupture in social relationships with a capacity to become a turning point if its impact on consciousness perpetually affects the way power networks operate in that society. Hence, what dictates subsequent courses of events after the occurrence of a historical



event is the consciousness of power in society – ideological, economic, military, and political power that affects consciousness to follow the lessons brought forward as a consequence of the historical event.

### ***Religion***

Throughout this thesis, I consider religion not as a purely spiritual experience of a group or individuals, but as part of a cultural system that informs the meaning of human experience, and a form of discourse that expresses the ethos of a group in a way that is reasonable and significant for them (Geertz, 1973, p. 89-90). I therefore follow Geertz (1973) in his analysis of the significance of “religion as a cultural system” (1973, p. 88-125), and view religion as “a system of symbols”, that “establishes powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations” that postulates a “general order of existence” upon which the moods and motivations are presented as “uniquely realistic” (Geertz, 1973, p. 90). Geertz (1973, p. 90) emphasised the significant relationship between religion and culture because “religion tunes human action to an envisaged cosmic order and projects images of cosmic order onto the plane of human experience”. It is an important part of culture, ““an equipment for living”, equipment that is substantial, at hand, usable, and used” (Geertz, 2005, p. 6).

The view of religion as a cultural system infused with meanings that are internal to those who believe in them requires reflexive engagement and position taking to interpret the concepts and events in a way that is plausible to the meaning held by the subjects of the study (Chabal & Daloz, 2006; Madison, 2005). This approach is consistent with the understanding of truth “in its historical and discursive specificities” (McLaren, 1989, p. 184). As noted by Mbiti (1969, p. 2), “[b]ecause traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life”. This approach to religion enables me to privilege indigenous voices by illuminating the meanings that participants hold regarding social realities at the research site (Rigney, 1999). It also helps frame the research with the intention of demystifying oppressive knowledge systems that obscure rather than reveal perspectives from below (Smith, 2005).

### ***Place and centredlessness***

Place is an important theoretical concept in this study. It is regarded as the embodiment of tradition, knowledge, and relationship. It is the source and the end of knowledge (Casey, 1993). In Chapter Three, place is symbolised by the Ark of the Covenant that became the seat of the glory of Ethiopian kings before 1974. It also represented the idea of the Ethiopian nation as a unifying and supreme centre of political (vertical) and social (horizontal) integration. Centre entails emplacement, the need to be connected or rooted in place. The study follows Casey's (Casey, 1993, p. 11) view that "there is no being without place". Consequently all knowledge is rooted in particular places. From this perspective, the Ethiopian traditional education system emanated from Ethiopia as place, while the western education system emanated from particular places in the west. However, due to the ideology of universalism, western education appears to be the only relevant human experience making traditional experience irrelevant from education. The study considers alienation as separation from place.

Centredlessness is the condition of alienation at two levels. First, it refers to the condition of separation from Ethiopian tradition and experience as place. This separation occurs as students construct their identity and social roles, and acquire views regarding the backwardness of tradition thereby avoiding studying traditional knowledge and disregarding participation in cultural life. Students identify themselves as modern and consider themselves as part of the system of elitism. The second stage occurs with the alienation of students from the new identity they constructed through education. Due to the informal rules, unemployment, and similar factors, many students realise that the promises of modernisation cannot be realised through the education system. This condition is further explored in Chapter Seven.

## **1.2. METHODOLOGY**

This section presents the critical epistemology that guided the research, and the four methodological stages followed in the process of gathering and interpreting information. The methods used include two field works consisting of observations and

interviews over a period of five months. Information was obtained from students in two traditional schools, two public high schools and one university. Teachers, parents, school administration officers, community elders, individuals from government and non-governmental organizations and unemployed highschool and college graduates (see Appendix A). Historical event analysis was employed in the process of reconstructing the condition of education in the country across a long historical period.

### ***1.2.1. Epistemology of Method***

This study is a critical qualitative research that combines elements of critical theory and ethnography (Carspecken, 1996; Denzin, 2001; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003; Madison, 2005; Tamboukou & Ball, 2003; Thomas, 1993 ). Applying ethnographic research in Africa creates a sense of uneasiness for two reasons. First, it brings into memory the tradition of anthropologists who travelled across Africa to discover the “exotic other” that ultimately became the “supreme receptacle” of human beings’ strange or negative experiences (Chabal, 2009; Mbembe, 2001; Mudimbe, 1988). Second, the earlier basis of much of ethnographic work, which is the modernist epistemology of truth as “the conformity of thought with its object” (Cunning, 2003 ), or agreement between cognition and its object (Kant, 1965 p. 97), has faced serious challenges that involves the crisis in representation, the accuracy of observation, the validity of findings, and the issue of power/knowledge (Marcus, 1986 ; Rosaldo, 1989 ; Said, 1978). Most research was based on the possibility of accurate perception and the certainty in presence. However, the traditional certainty in the existence of a stable world that could be perceived and explained by the writings of the researcher has been challenged from the perspective of postmodernism. If “beyond and behind what one believes ... there has never been anything but writing” or text, (Derrida, 1976, p. 159), how can a researcher know and report the “truth” about the “real” world?

While researchers have attempted to respond to the crisis in anthropology by emphasising interpretative approaches (Marcus, 1986 ), Carspecken (1996) claims that Habermas has escaped the crisis of representation by abandoning presence as a source of knowledge. By dividing the life world between action and discourse, he located truth at the level of discourse, as “a discursively reached agreement among participants in

argumentation” (Habermas, 2003, p. 36-41). From this perspective, truth is not founded on the basis of the empiricist belief in presence but on the capacity of truth claims to coordinate activities and allow the understanding or consensus among people. Hence, what the researcher initially hears from people is not the bare truth but truth claims that need to be translated into validity claims. Validity claims then need to be tested with validity conditions to be regarded as true. The most important idea behind this process is that “for all kinds of truth claims it is the consent given by a group of people, potentially universal in membership, that validates the claim” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 21). However, this does not mean that consent alone is the litmus test for a truth claim.

While society is enmeshed with unequal power relations, not everyone’s claim could pass the consensus test to be counted as true. Because “power accompanies all action” (Giddens, 1984, p. 14) those who have the means to exercise power could coerce or influence others to accept their own claims as true. This begets the significance of a critical epistemological perspective which says “that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations which are social and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003, p. 105). Hence, critical qualitative research follows this epistemological belief regarding the connection between truth and power, and adopts a research methodology that focuses on the complex ways through which “power corrupts knowledge” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 21). This approach contributes not just to unmask the many faces of oppression in society but also to elevate the researcher’s awareness of the subtle ways through which power networks from the researcher’s position could enter into the research process and distort the findings. The research follows this general epistemological perspective in the process of obtaining information from participants using the following methods.

### ***Stage One: Building “thick description”***

The first stage of the research was to gather a form of data often known as thick description (Chabal & Daloz, 2006, p. 173; Denzin, 2001, p. 107; Geertz, 1973, p. 18). The thick description aimed at gaining as much information as possible regarding the prevailing ontological view available locally on education and its current practice. I

travelled to Ethiopia and stayed there for three months collecting data by observing as a “witness wanderer” who gathers a wide range of synchronic and diachronic data that can be used as a “map” to the social world of the researched (Schostak & Schostak, 2008, p. 238). I used audio recording devices and field notes. I observed the practice of education in government and traditional schools as well as academic and social activities of the students in their surroundings.

Based on my observation, I conducted interviews with key informants such as teachers, parents and local authorities on topics related to observed acts. In the process, I gathered documents such as policies, notices, student publications and recorded oral information regarding practices, beliefs, and attitudes related to education. The validity condition for the data at this stage was enhanced through my reflexive engagement with the data, which is observing my own observation with the purpose of enhancing communicative validity (Kvale, 1995). As it is impossible to observe and write about everything, my observation was guided by aspects and conditions of social action that commonly emerge in association with education.

Although Carspecken (1996, p. 53) suggests building thick description from “accounts of observed activity that include all speech acts in verbatim form and many observations of body movements and postures”, others have provided the merit of obtaining thick-description from wider sources (Chabal & Daloz, 2006, p. 173; Geertz, 1973, p. 5). Thick description “captures the meaning and experiences that have occurred in a problematic situation. Reports, meanings, intentions, history, biography and relevant relational, interactional and situational processes in a rich, dense and detailed manner” could provide thick description better than mere factual descriptions (Denzin, 2001, p. 162). Hence, the primary record at this stage started with observation followed by the gathering of wider information on historical, cultural and political events that configured the specificity of the social site in relation to education. In the process of doing this, it became clear to me that many of the questions that I asked required further information on religion, tradition, history, politics and culture. At that stage, the data I gathered was not treated as a definitive representation of the social world of the students. Instead, I considered it as a clue that allows the critical reconstruction of the social world

out of which the subjectivities of the students and the practice of education was to be interpreted.

***Stage two: Reconstructive analysis***

This is the process of analysing the entire evidence gathered to provide a critical reconstruction of the social world of the subject at hand. In this thesis, this second stage analysis started following the gathering of as much information as possible through documentary records, published research and ethnographic field work and interviews. After I returned from my first field work in Ethiopia, I started reading the thick primary record while noticing patterns as well as unusual events and entering the data into a word database in the way recommended by Carspecken (1996, p. 95). This preliminary analysis is conducted with an emphasis on understanding the observed practices in their cultural context.

In conducting the preliminary analysis, I divided the primary record into three sets of social practices. These include personal practices, institutional practices, and relational practices. Personal practices include information about observed individual activities, and information about beliefs, challenges, interests and ideas of persons involved in the research. Personal practices are often referenced to the individual's sense of unique positions and circumstances in society. Observed practices at this level led to institutional practices which are activities and their explanations that are in some ways related to the function of the institutions concerned. For example, rules of admission, promotion, and certification are regarded as instances of the institutional practise of the schools that are related in one way or another to personal practices. The third category includes relational practices that involve student activities based on religious beliefs, cultural norms, commitment to significant others, social groups, and the country at large. Activities and ideas related to relational practices involved theories that are often referenced to history, religion, and politics. Individual, institutional, and relational practices analysed in this way provided me with an insider perspective that enabled me to generate various "why" questions that required a critical re-reading of the history and practice of education in the country. While personal practices were sometimes doubted, and institutional practices criticised or supported, relational practices were expressed

with a sense of certainty that provided some form of purpose and meaning to participants. Given the unstable and at times hostile social and political context of the country, especially since the end of the monarchical rule in 1974, relational inquiries led me to the generation of a large amount of historical information that further generated more information on the development of the consciousness of power and the rise of Eurocentrism through political and social institutions. At this stage, I found Sewell's (1996, p. 225-270) idea of historical event analysis extremely useful in identifying and interpreting key historical events that configured the social and political field of the country and influenced the adoption of Eurocentric institutions and practices that are linked to the relational practices of the students.

The analysis at this stage enabled me to be 'immersed' in the social context as deeply as possible, and interpret ideas and practices that are related to the research from the perspective of the place of that immersion. In other words, the greatest achievement of the preliminary analysis was the extent to which I was positioned or placed to be 'in the spirit' of the researched. But, this does not mean to 'become one' with their ideas, but to use my access to critical theoretical perspectives on the one hand and my insider perspectives on the other to interpret the conditions under which the practice of education reproduces subjugation to power at a local level, and to relate that to national, and regional or global levels. This thesis is the outcome of the rich nuanced findings that emerged from in-depth interviews with a range of research participants, ethnographic field observations, and reflexive engagement with critical theoretical perspectives, and my own academic and personal experiences. Although written by positioning myself in the world of the researcher, the reconstruction is limited by the breadth and width of my information and my experiences. Reconstructive analysis at stage two took a period of one year, and once it had been finalised, I returned to the research site to generate more data based on issues that were identified and articulated at this stage.

### ***Stage Three: Dialogical Data Generation***

My second field work in Ethiopia was designed to generate dialogical data. I followed Carspecken's suggestion to generate dialogical data based on the reconstructed analysis in order to "democratise the research process and to challenge the material

produced at the second stage” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 155). I returned to the research site to further explore the key ideas that were identified at stage two through semi-structured interviews with ten students and five teachers from each of the three educational institutions. I also conducted interviews with nine traditional education students and five teachers. Interviews began by providing interviewees with information sheet (See Appendix B), and once consent was secured, by asking them to recall concrete events and by asking to explain the background beliefs, feelings, roles and interests involved with the events and ideas. Following the interviews, responses were categorised to allow greater analytical depth of the first stages of analysis. Based on the outcomes further information was obtained from six unemployed graduates, four parents, four elders, two school officials, three government experts and two workers from non-governmental organizations (See Appendix A). I also gathered information regarding the link between the school and other social sites that have direct or indirect links with the condition of education. A total of five facilitated group discussions, each involving five to ten participants were undertaken. Finally, analysis was conducted comparing the dialogical data with my reconstruction at the second stage, noticing if the first supported the latter, and vice versa.

#### ***Stage Four: System relations***

After generating dialogical data, the next stage was to systematically interpret relationships as they were articulated in the interviews and recorded through field observations. Relationships between the students and their significant others such as parents and friends in cultural settings, students and teachers in educational settings, and students and the state in educational settings were analysed based on the findings at the three stages above. Links to institutions other than the school were established following routine movement of students, educational and cultural materials, policy documents, places of worship and work. Published and non-published work as well as interview responses also led to social sites whose cultural forms intersect with one another and influence the action of the students as well as the culture of the school. Hence, stage four explored the system relations within and among various places.



Carspecken (1996, p. 203) recommended choosing a macro-level social theory to explain the findings of such an exploration. However, others have argued for theoretical eclecticism, a reporting process concerned with local plausibility rather than theoretical consistency (Chabal & Daloz, 2006, p. 309). The approach adopted here is consistent with the latter and favours local plausibility and eclecticism over a strict adherence to particular theoretical consistency, without losing sight of the need to avoid the illusion of essential identities (Anyidoho, 2006, p. 164), or the strong desire to liberate others without their “reflective participation” (Freire, 1970, p. 65). This requires a keen awareness of where to stand while reporting. Reflexive engagement in the research process has been adopted to avoid fixation on positionality and subjectivity (Sultana, 2007).

### ***1.2.2. Thesis Map***

The thesis has eight chapters that address three conceptual issues in line with the aims and objectives of the research. Part One includes Chapter One and Chapter Two. Chapter One introduced the research and provided an overview of the methodology applied. Chapter Two presents the literature involving the question of relevant education in Africa. Part Two includes Chapters Three and Four, both focusing on the traditional legacy of the country. In Chapter Three, the traditional political ideology of the Ethiopian state and its key values are interpreted based on the text of the Kebra Nagast and the daily practices of the people. This is followed by a discussion in Chapter Four on how traditional ideology and values are integrated in the traditional education system. This part has two sections. The first deals with the condition of how values of national significance are embedded in the content, and learned in the process of traditional education. The second part deals with how national values informed the interpretative mindset of Ethiopian traditional scholars in incorporating knowledge from outside the country. It highlights the legacy of creative incorporation of knowledge from internal and external sources in the country. The chapter shows that the traditional education system cemented national values, and Ethiopian scholars interpreted rather than imitated knowledge from foreign sources.

Part Three includes Chapter Five, Six, and Seven. These chapters explore the institutionalisation of elitdom, the rise of student messianism, and the alienation of students from the tradition of society and the institutions of the state. Chapter Five discusses how the traditional values that were analysed in the previous chapters were repressed, and social relationships strained due to the rise of elite institutions based on Eurocentrism. The chapter shows the emergence of consciousness of power and the replacement of the rule of kingdom by elitdom. Chapter Six explores the rise of elite messianism. It shows how western education contributed to the development of messianic identity and radicalism among Ethiopian students. It also shows how violence emerged as a means of suppressing dissent and legitimising power. Chapter Seven focuses on the effect of the Eurocentric education system and the practice of imitative education on the lives of contemporary students. It analyses the current national education policy and the challenges faced by students. It identifies the existence of double alienation (from society due to cultural estrangement, and from the system due to state repression) which results in centredlessness that affects the social life of Ethiopian students, and the link between the ideologies and structures that perpetuate this situation. Finally, Chapter Eight summarises the findings of the study and outlines suggestions for future research.

### ***1.2.3. Conclusion***

This chapter summarily presented general information about Ethiopia, the literature related to the question of relevant education in Ethiopia, and the aim and objectives of the study. Ethiopia, although unique in Africa due to its rich historical legacy and colonial independence, is still one of the poorest countries in the world. The literature showed that the relevance of western education to Ethiopian tradition has hardly been a topic of research. Most studies conducted in related topics considered the Ethiopian tradition as backward and subject to change by the use of western education. The few critical studies that challenged the practice of education focused on the relevance of either ideological or structural factors that led to the crisis in education. This study set out objectives that consider tradition as a starting point and the guiding principle of relevant knowledge. It also introduced key terms and concepts to be used in

this study. The chapter presented the epistemology of the research and the methods used to conduct it. The critical qualitative methodology used in this research is selected primarily based on the need to articulate the complexity of the issues involved in this study. The use of historical event analysis has helped to transcend the challenge of the lapse of time between relevant events that are required for analysis due to their analytical connections with the present. Moreover, the application of critical ethnography as suggested by Carspecken (1996), and others has helped to interpret cultural practices that are observed and communicated to the researcher through field work (S. Ball, 1994; Tamboukou & Ball, 2003). I believe that this study will create a fresh perspective on unsettled questions related to the relationship between tradition and education in Ethiopia and beyond.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THE QUESTION OF RELEVANT EDUCATION IN AFRICA**

#### **2.1. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter explores the literature on the debate regarding the relevance of western education in Africa. There are two reasons why this is used in relation to the question of relevant education in this study. First, the debate on the relevance of western knowledge to tradition is highly developed on the continental level. Although Ethiopia has a rich traditional and intellectual legacy that was not directly affected by colonialism, its scholars failed to offer a clear alternative for western education based on indigenous sources. Consequently, as noted in Chapter One, the theoretical debate on the relevance and significance of western education to the Ethiopian society is almost non-existent.<sup>1</sup> This is paradoxical when compared to other African countries' scholars who offered theoretical alternatives for western knowledge based on their views of African indigenous traditions although the latter were severely obliterated by European colonialism. Second, as anywhere else in Africa, modern education in Ethiopia is imported from the west and faces similar issues of relevance. Therefore, the debate on the relevance of western education to Africa is germane to the debate on the relevance of western education to Ethiopia. However, important distinctions are recognised in this study especially in relation to the development of the consciousness of power in Ethiopia as provided in Chapter Five.

This chapter begins by presenting three fundamental concepts that dominated the background for the proliferation of discourses in Africa, followed by a brief historical context for the emergence of early colonial and post-colonial education. It then presents

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<sup>1</sup> I recognise that there are few Ethiopian scholars who warned against the wholesale imitation of western education and who advised the significance of incorporating the strong aspects of Ethiopia's tradition and culture in the education of the youth generation. This is explored in later chapters and examples include, Kebede, M. (2008). *Return to the Source: Aleqa Asres Yenesew and the West*. Ethiopian Review. Tedla, E. (1995). *African Thought and Education* (Vol. 11). New York: Peter Lang. Isaac, E. (2007). Isaac, E. (2007, 2-4 March). *Ethiopian Cultural Legacy and the Role of youth*. Paper presented at the Afroflag Youth Vision Youth Conference on Culture, Leadership & Development, Addis Ababa. (Unpublished).

the debate on relevant education in Africa based on two exemplary perspectives that emerged out of this background. These include education based on western universalism, and education based on African personality and traditions. Finally, the search for relevant education in East Africa is presented through an exploration of education for self-reliance, and Afro-modern education. The chapter concludes by linking these discourses to the effects of African elites' consciousness of power towards the west.

## **2.2. BACKGROUND OF THE DISCOURSE ON EDUCATION IN AFRICA**

Three important themes dominate the background of discourses about relevant education in Africa. These include views regarding Western knowledge, otherness, and elitism. These three themes have provided historical continuity and political motives for the formulation of ideologies in education in Africa since the colonial period.

With regard to the first themes, conceptual relevance in education arises from the recognition of two contradictory characteristics within Western knowledge. First, there is recognition of the characteristic that “[a]ll the elements of a solution to the great problems of humanity have, at different times, existed in European thought” (Fanon, 1968, p. 314). Hence, there is the view that Western knowledge is a contribution and a potential source of progress for all. Second, there is recognition of the historical lesson that Africa was colonised and exploited by Europe. Hence, there is a historical view that Western knowledge has served the purpose of oppression, or domination. “All the faces of Western hegemony carry the multiple character of being both a contribution to the collective human repertoire ...and an expression of imperial domination, suffused with the effect of power” (Pieterse & Parekh, 1995 p. 1). These two attributes of western hegemony, contribution and domination, coordinate the often contradictory discourses regarding the relevance, or otherwise, of formal education in Africa.

There are three consequences that arise from the recognition of the hegemonic and universal character of Western knowledge in Africa. First, the specific historical, cultural, social and political experience of the West is objectified as a universal

achievement that can be classified, stored, and transferred between objects and human minds. The adoption of education policies, the construction of schools, the production of educational materials, the training of teachers, the use of the language of instruction and the evaluation of student achievements, gave physical existence to Western knowledge, and specific roles to persons involved in its distribution. This means that Western knowledge symbolised a new enlightenment, hope, and aspiration. It served, rhetorically at least, as “a production context”, a reference and a guidance for further production of knowledge (Knorr-Cetina, 1999, p. 6). Whether accepted or rejected, it lays the ground rules for the validity of knowledge; it invents a mental orbit for the generation and circulation of ideas and discourses. Consequently, the analysis of almost all discourses about Africa depended on “a Western epistemological order” (Mudimbe, 1988, p. x). All formal systems of education have adopted their curriculum and organisation, based on the Western model of education. Hence, for Africa, the West is presented as a living source of knowledge; it became the ideal model of change, and the sole archetype of evolutionary progress.

The second effect of Western knowledge is the role that it played in the invention of the other. In Orientalism, otherness represented the homogenised non-Western other that was understood by its distinct differences from the occident (Said, 1978). However, when it comes to Africa, the meaning of otherness took a much deeper sense of difference. As far as Africa was concerned, otherness represented not just a culturally, historically, and politically different human experience from the west, but rather something that represented an idea of “absence”, of “nothingness”, or “nonbeingness”, or the experience of non-reality (Mbembe, 2001, p. 4). Thus, otherness, when it is used in reference to Africa represents a void space in the historical and cultural tradition of the world. This “nothingness” is especially illustrated in the thoughts of Western philosophers who reduced the lives of Africans’ to represent the life of “the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state”, and to show that “there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character”, as Africa “is no historical part of the world” (Hegel, 1856, p. 91-99). Otherness can also be related to the idea of primitive man whose characteristics were like that of psychotic patients (Heinz, 1998) or people with intellectual disabilities who lacked the capacity to learn new things

(Lyons, 1970). In this thesis of otherness, the African other occupied a primordial world characterised by epistemic nihilism. It is precisely because of the belief in this void that colonialism gained its moral justification to organise, and rule in the name of civilizing the other (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 1).

In relation to education, otherness had special significance. In the colonial period, it assumed a biological justification. The African was considered “deficient” in its learning capacity, and colonial educational policies were formulated with the view to discipline the “Negro” with manual labour and Christian morality (Lyons, 1970, p. 1-13). Otherness had also a cultural justification provided by Western thinkers. For example, John Locke and John S. Mill based their arguments for the colonisation of non-European races on the latter’s inability to produce the cultural characteristics of the West, such as individualism and the rule of law (Pieterse & Parekh, 1995 ). Economic otherness could be related to the perspective reflected in Adam Smith’s view that cooperation as the basis of civilisation was impossible in Africa as the African King was the “absolute master of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages” (Smith, 1776, p. 117). It can also be viewed in light of the inability of the “barbarian” to become homo-economicus, to exchange goods and rights, and create society (Foucault, 2004, p. 194-197).

The process of inventing the other with this dismal meaning of difference or nothingness had internal motives in Europe. The development of the social sciences, industrial revolution, and enlightenment (Sindima, 1989) necessitated the need to identify the “sovereign”, “new”, “Fabian” and European self and civilisation in clear contrast with the “primitive”, “archaic” and “barbaric” other (Ferguson, 2000, p. 10). As noted by Eze (2002, p. 53), “[t]he shine and the glow of Europe’s history, progress, and modernity are therefore framed against the darkness of Africa”. However, it is important to note that these perspectives were not mere discourses, nor were their effects limited within the geography of their production. As noted by Said (1978), the other is not simply an invention of an idea, or knowledge, but also of practice and power. The perception of otherness sanctioned practices that were necessary to bring its assumed qualities into reality. It is argued that the vast social field upon which African elites

think and act as modernisers arose from the dichotomising system of the colonising structure as Mudimbe argues below:

Because of the colonizing structure, a dichotomizing system has emerged, and with it a great number of current paradigmatic oppositions have developed, traditional versus modern; oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialised civilization; subsistence economies versus highly productive economies. In Africa, a great deal of attention is generally given to the evolution implied and promised by the passage from the former paradigms to the latter (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 4).

The establishment of this dichotomising system was accompanied with powerful forces of acculturation. There was the acculturating effect of physical force that was deployed to terrorise the colonised, and to destroy their belief systems (Bodley, 2008, p. 57) and there was what Ranger called “the invention of traditions” to turn the population into colonial subjects (Ranger, 1997, p. 212-221). There were elicited practices intended to bribe authority from traditional chiefs (Chabal, 2009), there were measures to link the domestic economy with the capitalist economy (Meillassoux, 1981, p. x); and there were also missionary and colonial education to turn the colonised into a productive subject within the system that exploits him/her. It was within this world of difference and contradiction that the vision and mission of education was crafted for Africa. Education became a means of conversion into the colonial model of life; a means of integrating the other into the vision of the coloniser and a means of acquiring the power of the coloniser.

The third point is the creation and development of elitism, social, political and cultural legitimacy for Western educated individuals to speak and act on behalf of the rest of the mass population, to transfer, or import the Western experience into Africa. The dichotomising effect of the colonising structure could be thought of as having its effect on the constitution of human identity- dividing individuals within groups and



families as educated versus ignorant. Thus Western knowledge as a source of progress that can be learned at schools, and otherness as a state of primitivism, or backwardness that characterised African societies, sanctioned the higher epistemic, social and political status of African elites to act as modernisers or educators. What characterises Elitdom is therefore the change for the basis of the legitimacy of power from traditional sources, as was in the case of most kingdoms, to knowledge, more specifically, Western knowledge. Consequently,

Large sections of the African people have nothing to do with the present-day economic and political structures within their own countries, nor with intellectuals' and universities' projects for linking Western experience to the African context (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 165).

I consider the above three themes- Western knowledge, otherness, and elitdom as important in shaping the variety of ideas about education in Africa. Based on these three themes, I will consider major educational trends that emerged in Africa.

### **2.3. EDUCATION AND THE SEARCH FOR RELEVANCE IN AFRICA**

The claim of divergent groups to control or influence the process of education in their own interests in Africa reveals the nature of ideology that governs the relevance of education in the continent. Colonial leaders desired education to make the natives useful for the colonial system. African intellectuals claimed education to harness nationalism and overtake political power from colonial rulers. African individuals and families demanded schools hoping for a better future for their children (Anderson, 1971; S. J. Ball, 1983; E. H. Berman, 1977; Ranger, 1965). The World Bank is criticised for viewing African education as a field of economic investment with a high rate of return (Assie-Lumumba, 2006; Brock-Utne, 2000 ). These diverse and at times contradictory goals advanced by various groups suggest a view of ideologies in education as

embedded within the power interests of the dominant groups concerned. From this perspective, I consider ideology in this chapter as beliefs that are articulated to advance a group's interest to power (McCarthy, 1996, p. 30) or to legitimate "the power of a dominant social group or class" (Eagleton, 1991, p. 5). Ekeh's (1975, p. 94) definition of ideology as "the unconscious distortions or perversions of truth by intellectuals in advancing points of view that favour or benefit the interests of particular groups for which the intellectual act as spokesmen", is significantly relevant. Based on this view of ideologies as 'interest-begotten theories' I examine how discourses of relevant education are produced often to advance power interests, and how many of these discourses are related to consciousness of power (Ekeh, 1975, p. 94).

### ***2.3.1. The Rise of Western Education in Africa***

Fafunwa (1982) argued that traditional African education was relevant to society. The purpose of education was to make the individual a responsible and competent member of the community to which he/she belonged. The subjects studied include intellectual, practical and leisure activities. Intellectual studies included history, legend, proverbs, tales and storytelling, local geography, riddles etc. The practical studies included farming, fishing, wood work, weaving, pottery, blacksmithing, etc. The leisure studies included recreation, wrestling, dancing, and singing, decoration, drumming etc. "The curriculum was relevant to the needs of the society" with no or little unemployment (Fafunwa, 1982, p. 10). But the colonial structure created a contradiction between production and consumption, culture and politics, vision and reality (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 4; Beidelman, 1981). Education was introduced to lubricate the friction among these contradictory realities which lie in the African psychological and social world.

Ranger (1965) showed that the initial reaction of Africans to Western education before the 1920s was lukewarm, even at times negative. The suspicion changed into acceptance in the 1930s and to high demand, in later years. In Kenya, the independent schools movement, and Harambe or self-help schools were interested in Western education primarily due to the political consciousness they developed regarding their status as colonial subjects (Ranger, 1965, p. 10). Thus, during colonialism, the drive towards education was motivated by the desire to acquire economic opportunities

created in the colony. The following quote from students in Southern Rhodesia in the 1930s captures the meaning and aspiration of education most Africans had for education,

To us education meant reading books, writing and talking English, and doing arithmetic...At our homes we had done a lot of ploughing, planting, weeding and harvesting.... We knew how to do these things. What we knew was not education; education was what we did not know. We wanted, as we said in Ndebele, "to learn the book until it remained in our heads, to speak English until we could speak it through our noses (Ranger, 1965, p. 68).

Colonialism impregnated a vision of modernisation in the minds of African leaders. It presented western education as the sacred field of government activity and a legitimizing force for claiming power. In doing so, colonialism created consciousness of power towards the ideology of Eurocentrism in Africa. It created an enduring link between political power and western education, the latter being the legitimate source of authority in the post colony.

Colonial leaders did not simply import the liberal education model of their own countries into Africa as this could have been counterproductive to the colonial system of exploitation they intended to maintain. Therefore, they were reluctant to introduce values of equality and freedom of expression to the minds of their colonial subjects (Pieterse & Parekh, 1995 ). What they sought to introduce was traditions of “governance rather than of production” (Ranger, 1997, p. 228). Lyons (1970) showed that colonial education policies of the 1840s and 1860s were guided by scientific racism which held the view that the Africans were “deficient in their learning capacity” (Lyons, 1970, p. 13). Missionaries viewed African converts not as Christian brothers but as “loyal servants” (Ranger, 1997) and, the process of education in the Congo in the 1960s produced “docile bodies” that became alienated from the culture of their own people (Mudimbe, 1994, p. 121).

Colonial administrators and missionaries were instructed to focus on teaching Africans to be loyal servants for the colonies. From the perspective of the colonisers,

education was valued for the purpose of making Africans useful to the colonial empire. The type of education considered relevant was nothing more than training Africans in manual labour and reinforcing identities of subordination towards European rule over Africa (Lyons, 1970). The outcome of colonial education was not just mis-education but also under-education. Sunmonu (1993) noted that 85-95% of Africans remained illiterate during colonialism, and a half a century of colonial rule in Angola and Mozambique produced not more than 10 medical doctors or engineers. This means “colonial rule both introduced and arrested the flow of new values and institutions, and also that it both changed and froze their traditional counterparts” (Pieterse & Parekh, 1995 p. 2). According to these arguments, Africans as collectives and individuals believed that their freedom will be realised through the institutions that were introduced to them by their oppressors.

Anderson (1971) noted that, African individuals and groups started to demand more education as individuals started to gain material benefit out of it. This drive became the primary force once political independence was attained. Africans who stood together demanding better education against the colonial rule started to compete against each other for the few job opportunities that were available in the post colony. The post-colonial state failed to realise the benefits of education for many Africans primarily due to its failure at economic and cultural independence. Nyamnjoh (2007, p. 97) noted this when he wrote, “Economic power was largely retained by Europeans and expatriates. Which is why the leaders suck the peasants like ticks in order to sustain their kingly appetites”. This discussion shows that early colonial education in Africa was a means of legitimising the overall power of the colonisers. It was largely carried out by missionary schools which were indoctrinating centres for the new *evolues* that inherited the civilising mission and political power of colonialism.

### ***2.3.2. Education and the post-colonial world***

According to Mazrui (1978) there had been two major political crises that African countries faced since independence. These are the crisis of political legitimacy, and national integration (Mazrui, 1978, p. 268). Political legitimacy has to do with the vertical relationship between the leaders and the ordinary citizens. This relationship is in

crisis because the majority of Africans are dissatisfied with their own leaders in their own states. National integration has to do with the horizontal relationship among ethnic groups or individuals. This relationship is in crisis because “one group did not accept another as belonging”. African elites coordinated these two crises with education through what Ekeh (1975, p. 104-105) called “the ethnic domain partition ideology”, by “dividing Africans along traditional spheres of influence while at the same time undermining them as primordial entities by presenting Western education as the only basis of legitimacy...”. What lies at the core of the political problem is the absence of consensus on national direction. As Mazrui (1978, p. 275) argued, “The whole question of values and goals is in a state of flux”. Consequently, two publics are visible in the African socio-political landscape: a primordial public, and a civic public (Ekeh, 1975; Osaghae, 2006), or the formal, and the informal sector (Chabal, 2009).

The primordial public or the informal sector is founded on stronger moral obligations or reciprocity that arises from belonging to a certain ethnic group that provides security and identity to its members (Chabal, 2009; Ekeh, 1975). The civic public or the formal sector includes government institutions that operate based on objective rules and regulations; it provides material benefit to its employees with no consideration to their identity, morality, or beliefs. These two publics exist side by side, and Africans strive to obtain material benefits from the civic public to fulfil their duties in the primordial public. Ekeh (1975, p. 111) argues, “[t]he destructive result of African politics in the post-colonial era owes something to the amorality of the civic public”. For example, corruption in the civic public either in the form of embezzlement of funds, or giving bribes to state authorities in exchange for favours, or as a form of abuse of authority by giving inequitable access to public services to certain group members against others, may be regarded with less moral rapprochement from ones primordial public (Ekeh, 1975, p. 110).

In the context of crises that involved the above horizontal (between or among individuals and groups) and vertical (between the leaders and the people) relationships, the quest for relevant education was proposed in light of nationalist, developmental, and internationalist ideologies (Mazrui, 1978). According to Mazrui (1978, p. 202), those who advocated the desirability of education for nationalistic purposes held the view that

education had to be “relevant to national purpose and national identity”. They sought education to promote cultural engagement over social engagement, and wanted to sensitize the curriculum and syllabus with African concepts of identity, values, history, tradition etc. Those who saw the supremacy of developmental criteria over cultural relevance, on the other hand, wanted to promote Western education, and values such as rationalism and individualism to transform society. Others criticised both perspectives and presented eclectic approaches with a view to enable Africa to benefit from and contribute to the global fund of knowledge. These three approaches for the desirability of education were not mutually exclusive from each other. Nationalist education held issues of development, and perspectives on knowledge as a universal heritage, and vice versa. Moreover, these perspectives developed within a social and cultural context that was largely shaped by the discourse of otherness and the practice of colonialism (Assié-Lumumba, Mazrui, & Dembélé, 2013). I will present exemplar perspectives that arose under two general goals of education: education based on Universalism and education based on African personality and traditions.

### ***2.3.3. Education Based on Universalism***

Development has been the strongest justification for the expansion of education in Africa. The conceptualisation and implementation of both development and education follow a Universalist perspective. On the conceptual level, the Universalist trend in African education refers to thoughts and practices that accept the existence of a single path towards human development. That path was believed to have been exhibited in a hierarchical stage of evolutionary change, social transformation, and economic growth in Western countries (Rostow, 1959). On the level of practice, most African states, multinational organisations and several non-government organisations support the practice of education as a means to realise the vision of global society implied by Universalism (King, 2007; Tikly, 2001).

Under Universalism, the possibility of progress was conceived within the theoretical framework of modernisation theory (Brohman, 1995) and the specific role education was believed would play to realise this, through human capital development (Psacharopoulos, 1988; Schultz, 1961). Major points propagated include an emphasis on

internal causes of poverty, the necessity of aid and support, the focus on physical expansion of existing educational infrastructure etc. Although severely criticised, this perspective is the strongest of all other discourses in Africa as it has been backed by strong institutional and structural support systems (Tikly, 2004), ranging from powerful governments and multilateral organisations such as the World Bank to national political forces such as political parties and local civic clubs.

The Universalist school of thought accepted the belief in the existence of tradition and modernity as opposite categories in every society and the triumph of modernity over tradition as a necessary step towards civilization (Hensbroek, 1999, p. 12). One of the earliest thinkers in this school was Africanus Horton. Horton believed that civilisation was a universal attribute of all human beings that can be transferred from one race to the other. Africa could acquire independence and development through the effective utilisation of the tools of Western civilisation (Hensbroek, 1999). Horton viewed Africans trapped in “bestly superstition, polygamy, domestic slavery, and paralysing customs and institutions” (Hensbroek, 1999, p. 35). He viewed Europe as a “benevolent civiliser” whose historic mission was to help “[t]o raise the nations of Africa from the debased and degraded state of which they have fallen” (Hensbroek, 1999, p. 35; Horton, 2011, p. vii). Horton believed that Western values were universal human values whose expansion through the school could enable Africans to take-off towards a higher stage of civilisation. His views signalled the earliest conflict between Western education elites and traditional leaders in Africa as he proposed the creation of “new Western style states ruled by Western educated Africans and not the traditional rulers” (Nwauwa, 1999, p. 114). In the 1960s, he proposed the education of a large number of Africans and the creation of university under the colonial government. Although his proposals were defeated at that time, “Horton later became the symbol of British post-war policy of creating an African educated middle class with whom to collaborate during decolonization” (Nwauwa, 1999, p. 119).

Immanuel Geiss (1974), in his study of Pan-Africanism, reflected the same perspectives expounded by Horton. Geiss viewed Pan-Africanism as a movement that aimed not just at political unification but also at broader cultural and intellectual unity and solidarity among the African people. Geiss (1974, p. 427) thought that the condition

of life in Africa reflected a universal situation that occurred in other parts of the world, despite its own characteristics. He thought, ethnic groups in Africa were simply African versions of a traditional society; and “these social forms inevitably had to disappear as progress was made towards modernisation and industrialization, just as they had disappeared in Europe” (Geiss, 1974, p. 7). In this perceived process of evolutionary progress that involved “clash[es] between modern and traditional elements” the idea of “return to tradition” was considered as a “backward movement” that would “lead to intellectual isolation and to increased provincialism” (Geiss, 1974, p. 427). From this perspective, the colonial model of education was considered not irrelevant but insufficient. In the aftermath of independence, President Houphouet of Cote d’Ivoire reflected this perspective by declaring his aim to open a university “equivalent to those of the French universities, thus placing our [sic] youth on an equal planes of knowledge with the youth of one of the most civilised nations of the world” (Comte, 1970). He declared his strong support to France in his manifesto for the 1945 Constituent Assembly elections (Chafer, 2007). In December, 1959, Houphouet-Boigny advised his subjects that they should not be ashamed of their colonial past since colonialism was a ‘universal condition’ (Comte, 1970, p. 30).

These exemplar views assumed the existence of a universal educational programme that could uplift poor countries from the swamp of poverty. They considered Europe as a model, as a powerhouse of scientific knowledge and as a source of inspiration with technological skills and democratic ideals that could be imitated. They believed that because “Africa lags behind the West in the cultivation of rational inquiry”, the role of intellectuals should be to change the primitive, irrational basis of knowledge in Africa (Wiredu, 1980, p. 43). According to Wiredu (1980, p. 45):

The ideal way to reform backward customs in Africa, must, surely, be to undermine their foundation in superstition by fostering in the people ... the spirit of rational inquiry in all spheres of thought and belief.



The process of achieving this, according to Abiola Irele (Irele, 1992, p. 216), should be through alienation – the process of appropriating the “scientific spirit” of Western civilisation. In his article “In Praise of Alienation”, he argued that “as a matter of practical necessity, we have no choice but in the direction of Western culture and civilisation” (Irele, 1992, p. 215). In the past, while Africa has contributed labour resources to Western civilisation, the West has contributed intellectual resources to Africa. Without the contribution of Western intellectuals such as Locke, Montesquieu, Voltaire and Kant, Nigerians would have either a different constitution or “no constitution at all” (Irele, 1992, p. 219). According to Irele (1992, p. 216-217) in order to achieve integration with the world, and for civilizational progress, Africans need to be alienated from the “mythopoeic imagination” of their traditional worldview, and embrace the “deductive method”, which is the bedrock of Western civilisation.

The theoretical assumption of Universalism reflected above has been discredited from the failure of the global system to realise the promises of universal human values for all, and the failure of development and modernisation in many “third world” countries (Sachs, 1992). What needs to be emphasised here is the understanding of Universalism as an ideology (Wallerstein, 1990) that serves to advance the interest of those who impose it on others. This calls for a critical study into the ways through which elites and their structures use the ideology of Universalism in education to naturalise their dominance, to universalise their beliefs, to exclude “rival forms of thought”, and interpret social reality in ways that are beneficial for themselves (Eagleton, 1991, p. 5-45).

African elites and politicians adopted the European education system, curriculum and syllabus, including European languages as medium of instruction while “Ninety per cent of the population in Africa ... [spoke] only African languages” (Wa Thiongo as cited in Phillipson, 1996, p. 160). The question of relevance was linked with the improvement of the adopted system of education, and no possibilities were left for local cultural specificities to get into the system and improve its quality from below (George & Dei, 1998). Consequently, the improvement of education has been linked to nothing more than the provision of educational facilities and sufficient number of teachers in the school, as well as the enrolment and retention of large number of

students, often at primary schools levels (Labé, Dembélé, Geneviève Sirois, Motivans, & Bruneforth, 2013). Relevance is also conceptualised in terms of economic outcomes, and the extent to which education could result in better employment opportunities for students. From this perspective, it was argued that the failure of education planners was their inability to design education to meet the interest of employers who are “the final users of the ‘product’” (Rado, 1972, p. 461).

Such concerns of relevance permeate the thinking of educationalists who take for granted the significance of the existing institutions of education for the welfare and development of the African peoples. They emphasise the political and economic role of education to transform the culture of society by diffusing values that support the smooth and efficient functioning of the institutions themselves. Such an approach calls for attempts to use schools for the “spread of more democratic values and behavior” (Harber, 2002, p. 267). Yet, the vision of Universalism the schools propagate in Africa based on western knowledge follows what Apple (2004, p. 6) called “selective tradition”. Although, in the west, there is a “tradition of intellectual rebellion in which rigorous examination of ideas and discourse constituted political challenge” (Thomas, 1993 p. 18), such critical theoretical traditions are effectively excluded from the curriculum of the schools. Consequently, similar to the old practice of filtering liberal ideas from colonial education, the practice of African post-colonial education excluded critical theories from Freire, Dewey, and others from teacher training curriculums. This points to the view that within the broad frame of Universalism itself, education in Africa propagates selective concepts and values that are far removed from local scrutiny and ownership, and achievable only through schooling. The selected contents of education are akin to the ideology of Western educated elites and politicians that use them to establish the legitimacy of Elitdom- the rule of power based on western knowledge.

#### ***2.3.4. Education based on African personality and traditions***

The call for attention to the African cultural, traditional, philosophical and political experiences in education have been invoked both for the psychological upliftment of the individual and in order to build nationalist identities (Mazrui, 1978). At the psychological level, a unique African personality was invoked to defend the racial

identity of the individual. With regard to building nationalism, communal cultures or traditions are invoked to cement belonging into a political group. Synthesis of religious and traditional experiences for the development of relevant education systems in Africa was based on the belief of the existence of African culture, history, knowledge and tradition independent of the West (Diop & Cook, 1974). Blyden (1994) was keen to bring the indigenous and Islamic educational heritage to modern African education; Senghor & Halperin (1956) insisted on the existence of a uniquely “African” personality of Nigritude as a basis for the study of African aesthetics. Nkrumah (1970) presented his philosophy on the synthesis of indigenous, Islamic, and Western experiences for African modernisation under the name Conscientism, to mean consciousness and science. Jahn (1961 ) proposed the revival of a neo-African culture from the debris of ancient beliefs and rituals. Asante (2003) introduced the concept of “Afrocentrism” for the education of African-American students. These and many other philosophical and political programs considered the significance of tradition and culture to build Africanist identities. However, the degree to which African traditions and personality were considered relevant to education varied from one theory to another. In a more general sense, I follow Kebede (2004) in using the term Ethnophilosophy to represent ideas that presented Africa’s otherness as a defence against Eurocentrism.

Ethnophilosophers pursue a variety of ways on presenting how African traditions and personality should be related to Western knowledge. Some suggested that Africa’s uniqueness should be used as a basis for the development of a uniquely African knowledge autonomous and distinct from the West; others pursued integrationist approaches appealing on the importance of the African legacy to the hegemonic Western perspectives; while still others viewed it as a psychological remedy for the racially degrading perspectives of Western thought and a source of identity for Westernised Africans. Those who insisted on distinctiveness and difference argued that by nature, Africans have a different mindset from the European mode of thinking (Blyden, 1994; Senghor, 1966; Tempels, 1959). According to Senghor & Halperin (1956, p. 23-24), the African is a “sensualist; a being whose senses are exposed....He feels more than he sees. ... He assimilates and identifies himself with the Other”. Thus, Africans are not backward; they are simply different, driven towards a different type of inquiry into

nature, equally important to that of the West's. He further wrote, "White reason is analytical through use. Negro reason is intuitive through participation" (L. S. Senghor & Halperin, 1956, p. 24).

Blyden (1862; 1994) was one of the earliest thinkers who considered the significance of African traditions to their development. As a public figure, he endeavoured to introduce Arabic into the curriculum when he was president of Liberian College in 1880 (Pawliková-Vilhanová, 1998). His theory was based on the existence of distinct races in the world with distinct destinies (Hensbroek, 1999). He believed that all races have equal worth although one race may become better than another race in the use of the special gifts endowed to it by the creator (July, 2004, p. 213). In this respect, Africans were not inferior to Europeans, but different, even better in certain qualities, and vice versa. Blyden (1994, p. 91) was adamant in insisting that "things which have been of great advantage to Europe may work ruin to us". He proposed disengagement from Europe as a prerequisite for Africa's progress. For education, Blyden proposed that the study of the Modern Age, and the Age since the French Revolution, should be excluded from African curriculums. He argued that during this period, the power of the church declined in Europe, science and technology developed, and "the transatlantic slave trade arose, and those theories – theological, social and political – were invented, for the degradation and proscription of the Negro" (Blyden, 1994, p. 95).

For Blyden, it was precisely because of these latter developments that the history of the Modern Age should be discarded from the textbooks of African students as it could misinform and poison the mind of the young black students. He acknowledged the rise of great minds during this period such as Shakespeare, Milton, and others but insisted that "these are not the works on which the mind of the youthful African should be trained" (E. W. Blyden, 1994, p. 95). Although the Modern Age was a time of great progress for Europeans, it was also a time when the scientific methods of observation, measurement and classification were used to classify human races in order to justify the colonisation and exploitation of Africans. Similar to Blyden, Woodson (2006, p. 8) maintained that "each race has certain gifts which the other do not possess. It is by the development of these gifts that every race must justify its right to exist". He argued that education was used to control the mind of the Negro, and "courses such as economics,

history, literature, philosophy, religion” have been used to this end. Woodson (2006, p. v) maintained that Africans educated with these courses are made to despise their own people and, “[a] Negro thus educated is a hopeless liability of the race”.

Ethnophilosophers who follow integrationist approaches emphasised the integration of African knowledge with the dominant knowledge of the West by arguing in favour of the importance of the other. They claim that Africa has a worldview that accommodates the dichotomous and opposite realms of reality- a view of reality that “builds bridges between ... the so called ...rational and irrational, ... , scientific and superstitious, visible and invisible, real and unreal; making it impossible for anything to be one without also being the other” (Nyamnjoh, 2004, p. 29). The implication of this view is that any form of political, economic or social engagement with Africa should consider the centrality of African traditions which are ecologically friendly, humanistic, and spiritual. The success of development requires the serious considerations of African religions because the “African people experience modern change as a religious phenomenon” (Mbiti, 1969, p. 262-263). A traditional way of life is emphasised in terms of its importance for ecological protection and biodiversity (Warren, 1992). Because “the forest is everything for the African’ he/she protects it as a source of the fulfilment of material and spiritual needs” (Sindima, 1989, p. 545).

Another view that proposed the use of Africa’s history and culture as a source of education arose under the name Afrocentrism. Afrocentric education aimed at defending the African American child’s sense of self-worth and identity from the oppressive Western knowledge by making available to him/her the worldview of his/her ancestors through education (Asante, 1991). The need for Afrocentric education arose due to the realisation that “all knowledge reflects the values and interests of its creators” (Banks, 1993, p. 4). Afrocentric education is considered important because “[t]he little African American child who sits in a classroom and is taught to accept as heroes and heroines individuals who defamed African people is being actively de-centred, dislocated, and made into a nonperson,..” (Asante, 1991, p. 171). Thus, Asante (1998, p. 41-42) argued that the Afrocentric idea liberates the oppressor-oppressed relationship that had been supported through the dominant Western perspectives, and it provides an African worldview for the development of African agency in the American society.

Others argued likewise that Africans educated in Western worldviews are “conceptually incarcerated” due to the inconsistency between the knowledge they acquired and the cultural phenomena in their own countries. They are “handicaps” in their “objective of human liberation” (Akbar, 1984, p. 396). Afrocentric education could create possibilities for genuine human liberation by transforming the social sciences using the humanistic values of the African people (Akbar, 1984, p. 396; Hoskins, 1992; Myers, 1985). Hence, the traditional, cultural and historical legacy of the continent should be reclaimed by Africans to serve them the instrument of liberation (Myers, 1987; Nobles 1986). This approach insists on presenting historical evidence to show that Africa, often represented by ancient Egypt and Ethiopia, was the source of civilisation (Ben-Jochannan, 1988; Diop & Cook, 1974; Hayford, 1969). Yet, the arguments of Ethnophilosophers regarding the existence of African philosophy and systems of thought has been criticised by other African scholars.

First, it could be questioned whether the categories of identities presented under African traditions and personality genuinely belonged to the Africans peoples. It is argued that Ethnophilosophy and Ethnology have remained as important fields for African scholars although several Western Anthropologists abandoned the study of unique personality differences based on Self/Other distinctions, especially since the 1960s (Lassiter, 2000). The significance of the study of African traditions could be related to the view that in Africa, culture is more important than economics or development (Mazrui, 1990) or, culture should be the basis of development (Verhelst, 1990). Mazrui (2008, p. 38) noted that:

While blacks clash whites in Africa over resources, blacks clash with blacks over their identities. White and black people, in other words, fight each other about who owns what, but blacks fight blacks about who is who.

Setting aside the philosophical debate on the possibility of representing culture using discourse, it is questionable whether the discourses of Ethnophiles in Africa reflected what is palpable among the people, in a faithful way, or not. Ethnic or national cultural

identities are viewed as inventions of politicians, elites and intellectuals (Iliffe, 1979; Ranger, 1997), as expressions of personal or group resentment to oppression, or as unique “sites of resistance” that escaped the West’s control and appropriation by virtue of their “clearest contrast and mark of difference” from it (Smith, 2005, p. 74). However, when viewed from the perspective of the link between education and tradition, the selective role of education based on the interest of elites and politicians is inescapable. Iliffe (1979, p. 334) noted that:

Just as later nationalists sought to create a national culture, so those who built modern tribes emphasised tribal culture. In each case educated men took the lead. Limiting a widening focus, limiting regional interaction by creating a microcosm of local tribes.

This points to the question why the so called African personality traits and ethnic identities are so important for African elites and politicians whose own life styles and beliefs are not dependent upon traditional identities. Could ideas such as Lassiter (2000) call for the revival of African ethnology in mainstream anthropology, and African elites’ fixation on ethnicity and indigenous identities be considered as a renewed attempt at the “reinvention of primitive society”, as Adam Kuper (2005) seemed to suggest? Or could the thesis of African personality and identities as presented by scholars be viewed as the reading of the agony of causalities and victims who are confined in the private realm of life as a result of exclusion from the benefit of citizenship (Haddour, 2000; Mbembé, 2002). Could the spiritual and material, the religious and political, the social and economic basis of the above questions be expressed equally using the same categories from Western versus African sources?

Agrawal (1995) challenges the basis of knowledge classification as Western versus African. He argues that knowledge classification follows power relations since knowledge is heterogeneous; “the same knowledge can be classified one way or the other depending on the interest it serves, the purpose for which it is harnessed, or the manner in which it is generated” (Agrawal, 1995, p. 433). Moreover, the emphasis on

indigenous or traditional knowledge by several Africanists was “ill-served by never making explicit the links between power and knowledge”; and, indigenous theorists failed to show “how power produces knowledge” (Agrawal, 1995, p. 431).

The emphasis on power leads to the view that discourses about tradition in Africa were not discourses of traditional people *per se*. Instead, they were part of the tools for the game in power politics. For example, there are studies that show the role of elites in inventing traditional identities in villages for the sake of gaining support for their political rivalries in the cities; the role of university professors and other learned men in clinging to “tribalism” to protect their profession from the amoral civic public; the concomitant rise of multiparty politics with ethnicity as political parties use the politics of inclusion and exclusion based on indigenous origin flaring up conflicts between natives and strangers (Nyamnjoh & Rowlands, 1998). Achebe (1965) appeared to have confessed the fictitiousness of traditional categories invented by African intellectuals as:

You have all heard of the African personality, of African democracy, of the African way to socialism, of negritude, and so on. They are all props we have fashioned at different times to help us get on our feet again. Once we are up we shan't need any of them anymore. But for the moment it is in the nature of things that we may need to counter racism with what Jean-Paul Sartre has called an anti-racist racism, to announce not just that we are as good as the next man but that we are much better.

According to Mazrui (1978), African intellectuals are ill-equipped as far as cultural liberation is concerned. They have contributed more for political liberation from colonialism than for cultural liberation. As far as the latter is concerned, they have not done even as good as the less educated dictators such as Mobutu Sese Seko, and Idi Amin. Consequently, for African cultural revival, “the non-intellectuals will be the decisive actors” (Mazrui, 1978, p. 378). Vilakazi (2000) is more adamant calling on the educated in Africa to learn from the “uncertificated” rural villagers,



In the entire history of civilizations, no intellectuals of a particular civilization have ever been placed in such a tragic situation in relation to the civilization of their own people.....Our intellectuals, who must initiate the formulation of a new proper education policy for Africa, must engage in a most massive and serious process of re-education of themselves on the principles and patterns of African civilizations, whose knowledge they have largely lost. The biggest spiritual and mental challenge to African intellectuals is that this massive re-education of themselves on the principles and patterns of African civilization, the only teachers they have are ordinary African men and women who are uncertificated, and largely in rural areas.

Not just intellectuals, but also African politicians have invoked the thesis of African traditions to justify their political programmes (Kenyatta, 1938; Nkrumah, 1970; Nyerere, 1967). However, Mutua (1999) argues that although African politicians appeared passionate about African culture and tradition, they have not created meaningful legal protection for indigenous peoples, to their knowledge, and cultures. They were rather engaged in the campaign of marginalisation, at best, and eradication at worst of African religions (Mutua, 1999, p. 170), which are the peoples' sources of "understanding" and "participation" in the universe (Mbiti, 1969, p. 256), or their used and usable "equipment for living" (C. Geertz, 1973, p. 6). These critics suggest the importance of two concepts in the study of elite ideologies in education, i.e., retraditionlization of traditions, and pedagogization of traditions. Retrationalisation has to do with the continued recycling of ethnic or local religious, social or cultural identities in politico-economic power relations. Pedagozation focuses on the integration of traditional views and practices in education to support the hegmonic power system of the present. Both approaches reinforce each other in consolidating the foundation and legitimacy of elitdom through the stasisization or fossilization of tradition using Western discourses which ascribed traditional identities with static meanings that have remained the same since the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Mudimbe, 1988).

## **2.4. THE SEARCH FOR RELEVANT EDUCATION IN EAST AFRICA**

### ***2.4.1. Education for Self-Reliance***

One of the central arguments in favour of Education for Self-Reliance was relevance. According to Nyerere (1967), in order to be relevant to the need of the people, education should be rooted in their traditional heritage. The African people's attitude and traditional way of life before the coming of European colonialism was socialist. Traditionally, Africans had no self-serving motives that caused individuals to accumulate wealth. He insisted that in the traditional African society "everybody was a worker" who regarded "all men as his brethren- as members of his ever extending family" (Nyerere, 1967, p. 4-12). For Nyerere, relevant education should aim at achieving this traditional state of mind of the African society, which was socialist. He insisted that, because socialism and democracy are "rooted in our past – in the traditional society which produced us ... our first step, therefore, must be to re-educate ourselves; to regain our former attitude of mind" (Nyerere, 1967, p. 12-16). From what he believed was the tradition of African societies, he provided interesting suggestions to make education relevant to build the new socialist state.

Nyerere (1967, p. 64) argued that the colonial education system that produced few elitist individuals, separated the student from the society in the name of formal instruction and emphasised book learning instead of practical lessons, should be replaced by an education system that is well centred on the traditional life of the people (1967, p. 54-59). Education should aim at producing not just professionals with specific disciplines but more importantly, values and attitudes that are central to the lives of the majority. The school should manifest the traditional, cooperative, and democratic aspect of the African life. "Every school should also be a farm"; from where students could learn the agricultural skills and social values of the community. Student examinations should consider the practical skills obtained in the field. These approaches will help

them understand that “they are being educated by the community in order that they shall become intelligent and active members of the community” (Nyerere, 1967, p. 70).

Nyerere’s insistence that the community, the village and the farm should be the centre upon which the learning community should be organised had important achievements. There was a positive change in the attitude of students and their teachers towards manual work as they increasingly participated in agricultural activities. There were increasing number of female students attending school; more schools were built in rural areas allowing access to students there, and there were significant mass literacy programs that enabled thousands of Tanzania’s to be able to read and write (Mosha, 1990). However, Mosha argues that Education for Self Reliance was not really a participatory program; it was a top-down initiative. “The processes involved in formulating the policy remain a secret between its architect and those who gave it their blessings” (Mosha, 1990, p. 66).

According to Mazrui (1978, p. 74), Nyerere was neither a socialist nor a traditionalist. He was a politician who used the European social and cultural vocabulary to create an impressive political rhetoric in Africa. In his early political career, he was more interested in Shakespeare and Marx than in Tanzanian traditions. Later, Nyerere and other politicians came to power from Christian denominations, and were “hostile to the chiefs and native authorities established under the policy of indirect rule” (Cameron, 1980, p. 105). The more obvious desire was to present African communalism as a basis for Western socialism; to transpose the “socio-ethical doctrine” of African traditions into a new politico-economic arrangement (Gyekye, 1988, p. 24-26). According to Masolo (1994, p. 27), the failures of Nyerere's ideal state could partly be explained by the “poor sociological assessment of the causes of the apparent communalistic 'attitudes' in African traditional social relations”. He argued, by “[ta]king the communalistic phenomenon of African traditional society as a given, Nyerere proceeded to inappropriately build upon it a social-political structure--the ujamaa system” (Masolo, 1994, p. 28).

#### ***2.4.2. Education for Afro-Modernisation***

Another example of the search for relevant education in East Africa could be found in the thesis of Afro-Modernism. Mazrui & Wagaw (1985) proposed Afro-Modernism first by identifying four educational foci within the traditional school system in Eastern Africa. These include an education system more concerned with serving society–sociocentric; an education system more concerned with serving God–theocentric; an education system concerned with nature for the service of either God or society–ecocentric; and finally, an education system devoted to individual self-fulfilment– egocentric. They analysed these four educational foci in the context of three educational traditions that existed in East Africa before the arrival of Europeans, and in light of the Euro-modern education system that was established based on Western values and interest during the colonial period. They also identified three functions associated with these educational traditions– the transmission of skills through training, “the transmission of values, perspectives and sense of identity” through socialisation, and the process of acculturation (Mazrui & Wagaw, 1985, p. 4).

Indigenous education in East Africa was largely devoted to the transmission of skills that were deemed important among the community. The skills were taught informally in the field, often by extended family members. The lessons involved the transmission of values, beliefs and ideas to the learners through training and socialisation. The lessons focused more on serving the interest of the community and sociocentric aims, rather than the interest of the individual and egocentric objectives (Mazrui & Wagaw, 1985, p. 5-6). A significant amount of emphasis was given to the environment. However, that concern emanated from the traditional belief that identified humans with nature. Mazrui & Wagaw (1985, p. 6) wrote, “[i]ndeed, many African belief systems still include animistic tendencies, which blur the distinction between man and nature, the living and the dead, the divine and the human”. They argued that this ecocentric aspect of cultural life has important contributions to the global environment which has been polluted through Western manufacturing. However, according to Mazrui and Wagaw (1985) there is a missing element with this aspect of indigenous ecocentrism if culture was to be used for the development of scientific knowledge. Africans need, not just ecological concern, but also ecological curiosity, “that framework of intellectual

agitation which seeks to explore and discover new factors about nature.... the excitement of thirst for knowledge without reference to function” (Mazrui & Wagaw, 1985, p. 5-6). Unlike Europeans, whose ecological orientation was that of curiosity, exploration and exploitation, Africans were oriented towards maintaining the sanctity of the environment. According to the authors, it was the European ecological curiosity model of thought, not the African ecological concern model, that led to scientific discovery

African educational traditions did indeed produce cultures which were capable of treating leopards, hyenas, monkeys, and even snakes as brothers, sisters and cousins, sharing a world. This could at times be a morality of ecological universal brotherhood. But those same African cultures fell short of developing physics, chemistry, zoology, botany, and mathematics. Ecological ethics was not accompanied by ecological science (Mazrui & Wagaw, 1985, p. 7).

Mazrui & Wagaw (1985) suggested that African education should be redefined by balancing the four educational legacies of East African societies. For example, the Euro-Modern education system in Africa has contributed to an increased sense of individual achievement or egocentrism, for enhancing curiosity to study nature, and towards a sense of individual autonomy rather than submission to religious or social creeds. The indigenous education system, on the other hand, has promoted ecological concern. Africans have greater awareness of the natural world, but this knowledge is motivated by the desire to serve society or religion. By injecting the Western motive of individual achievement, they claim, it is possible to initiate the desire of knowledge for its own sake. Hence, Western “egocentrism could be an infrastructure for producing individual geniuses like Darwin and Einstein” (Mazrui & Wagaw, 1985, p. 19). Education, they suggested, should realise, “a genuine marriage between traditional ecological concerns of African societies and the new ecological curiosity of Western civilisation” (Mazrui & Wagaw, 1985, p. 20).

This extraordinary initiative presented African traditions and European sciences as objectively and distinctively identifiable, static and usable formats for education.

With regard to Western science, they sought to separate science from westernization, and with regard to African traditions, they sought to separate environmental concern from the ‘totemic’ belief that underpinned it. Through this process of classifying, valuing, and integrating knowledge, they suggested the possibility of using education to create an African modernity that could transcend the shortcomings of Euro-modernism and Afro-traditionalism. Mazrui & Wagaw (1985, p. 20) insisted that the central target of education in East Africa should be:

Elimination of Euro-modernity, the creation of afro-Modernity,  
and the gradual integration of the indigenous, the Afro-Islamic,  
and the Afro-Christian traditions of education under the broader  
umbrella of Afro-Modernization.

In the proposed Afro-Modern education system, however, we see a confluence of contradictory perspectives and motives. First, Africans are recommended to maintain their traditional observance of the environment without taking their traditional beliefs about nature too seriously. They need to do this not for the sake of their traditional beliefs about nature, but for the sake of global ecological concerns. Second, Africans are recommended to promote the egocentric drive that enabled the West to achieve civilisation while maintaining the tradition that kept the environment from being polluted or destroyed. They need to do this for the sake of achieving scientific knowledge which will be necessary for “Afro-modernism”.

## **2.5. CONCLUSION**

The above literature suggests the existence of three interrelated factors that have contributed to the dominance of Eurocentrism in Africa. The first is inventive discourses, which are imaginative discourses of absence, lack, and nothingness that provided the earliest justifications for the establishment of western political domination in the continent. The second is productive practices which include the establishment of western institutions such as the colonial office, the justice system and the school that enforce rules and set standards of political behaviour. The third include the reproductive discourses and practices, whose functions are the recycling of the inventive and

productive discourses throughout the postcolonial period. The inventive discourses which created the imagination of Africa as a historical void (Hegel, 1856), or its people as tribal groups with primitive mentality, gave rise to the formulation of colonial policies that transformed Africa into a colonial construct. In particular, the colonial school was one of the institutions established based on the anthropological analysis of the non-educability of the Negro beyond childhood, and it has retained its colonial legacy until today (Lyons, 1970).

The major portion of the debate on the relevance of western education for Africa focused on nationalism and development: should education be invested more in culture than in development or vice versa? Should Africa's failure to modernise be blamed on primitivism or dependency? The only accessible responses regarding these debates came from African intellectuals whose cultural and intellectual experiences are significantly drawn from Western sources. Among them, traditional knowledge advocates have challenged the normativity and universality of Western knowledge while Universalists supported the need to change traditional perspectives as a prerequisite to modernisation. The starting point of their inquiry followed the epistemology of the West that operates based on dichotomies, and a classification of knowledge based on self and other. Those who accepted the normativity and universality of western knowledge, and those who challenged this, likewise, presented their views without forgetting the prescription of otherness to the socioeconomic life invented by the colonial structure. The African intellectuals who resisted western discourses were "so deeply shaped and moulded by them as to be unable to reject them without rejecting part of oneself" (Pieterse & Parekh, 1995 p. 3).

The above literature suggests two important points that will be explored in this study. First, there exists a distinct elite system that reproduces itself by producing knowledge about Africans. This elitist system is not open to ordinary Africans' views and experiences. It is a closed system guarded by boundaries of scholarship, language, and experience that separate the speakers from the object of their speech. Based on the Ethiopian case (Chapter Five, Six, and Seven), I use the notion of elitism to express this system. As indicated in the above literature, although the topic of the discourses of relevant education in Africa is about the lives of the African people, the speakers are not

ordinary Africans themselves. As Mudimbe (1988, p. x) suggested, what the plethora of discourses about knowledge in Africa so far underscored is a persistent fixation on “a non-African epistemological locus”, and the persistent absence of African perspectives that break through the prison of this fixation. However, this absence does not suggest a void in the existence of internalised and suppressed African worldviews that encompass not just the spiritual and traditional aspect of life but also the secular and political realms. Within peoples’ traditions, there are signs that are not interpreted, voices not heard, and meanings not fully understood. No prism of human discourse can illuminate all aspects of human life. Views about social realities, or their representations, or their meanings may not fit the actual contexts as the latter are constantly reformulated by various life dynamics. Taking this into account, the following two chapters (Chapters Three and Four) demonstrate this assertion based on Ethiopia’s traditional ideology and intellectual legacy.



## CHAPTER THREE

### KEBRA NAGAST: THE FOUNDING IDEOLOGY OF KINGDOM IN ETHIOPIA

#### 3.1. INTRODUCTION

*There is a book called 'Kebra Nagast' which contains the law of the whole of Ethiopia and the names of the shums (chiefs), and churches, and provinces are in the book. I pray you find out who has got this book, and send it to me, for in my country people will not obey my orders without it.*

*Yohannis IV, King of Zion, Emperor of Ethiopia*

The above is an extract from a letter of Emperor Yohannis King of Kings of Ethiopia written in 1872 to the British government. The British, after defeating Tewodros II, the predecessor of the author of the letter at the battle of Mekdela, looted the first and most organised of Ethiopia's national library and took with them a large quantity of manuscripts and artefacts, including the book of the Kebra Nagast. According to Professor Ephraim Isaac (1971), this letter moved people in the British Museum who returned the book to the king. The text of this book is the main analytical source of this chapter.

The chapter will highlight an important aspect of the ideological perspectives and social values that were suppressed by the advent of Elitdom in Ethiopia. It shows that values that emanate from the long tradition and lived culture of the people were the basis of social and political relationships in the country. In this chapter, I consider ideology as having the function of making "autonomous politics possible by providing the authoritative concepts that render it meaningful, the suasive images by means of which it can be sensibly grasped" (C. Geertz, 1973, p. 218). The analysis is supported based on the interpretation of the book of the Kebra Nagast which was the textual source of Ethiopia's state ideology before 1974. I will also use the views of teachers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and elders who were interviewed in Lalibela to elaborate the

findings from the document analysis. The chapter is organised in four main parts. The first focuses on showing the existence of an indigenous ideology that became the foundation of nationhood in Ethiopia. Second, the traditional ideas that served political and social relationships in the country will be explored under the notion of covenant and wisdom. The notion of covenant will be analysed as the basis of the ideology of a chosen nation, the rule of the ideal king, and the conception of centre. Third, the concept of wisdom will be discussed as a guiding principle for social relationships.

### **3.2. KEBRA NAGAST AS AN INDIGENOUS IDEOLOGY OF NATIONHOOD FOR ETHIOPIA**

Modern Ethiopian scholars have hardly made any attempt to interpret the significance of the Kebra Nagast. The significance of the book has been reduced to the mythical ideology of divine rule, and the content has hardly been regarded as anything more than a legend. In this section, I will present the observations for the significance of Kebra Nagast as an important source of political and social ideology in Ethiopia. The Kebra Nagast contains 117 chapters, and was written in Geez in 1270. It has incorporated important biblical stories in it but is not considered as a replacement for the Bible. According to a church scholar from Lalibela, the book can be regarded as the interpretation of the Bible from the perspective of Ethiopia (Interview, 15 April, 2011). Starting with the beginning of the world to the end, the book presents important stories and ideas focusing on the destiny of Ethiopia in the world. The most important aspect of the book is the legendary Queen of Sheba whose story became the ideological foundation for the constitution of Ethiopia as a nation. The Queen of Sheba heard the wisdom of King Solomon of Jerusalem and travelled to Jerusalem to visit him. During her stay, she fell into the trap of Solomon who wanted to sleep with her. On her way back to Ethiopia, she gave birth to a boy, Menelik I. Later, the young Menelik travelled to Israel to visit his father Solomon in Jerusalem. King Solomon rejoiced and wanted Menelik to succeed his throne in Israel after him. However, Menelik refused the offer out of his love for Ethiopia, and wanted to return home. Solomon then ordered the noble men of Israel to send their firstborn sons to serve Menelik in Ethiopia. The sons of the

noble men of Israel abducted the Ark of the Covenant from the Temple of Solomon and brought it with them to Ethiopia. It is believed by many Orthodox believers that the true Ark of the Covenant is still in the Axum church of Zion Mariyam. From that time onwards, Ethiopia became the chosen nation of God, and Menelik I became the founder of the Solomonic dynasty in the country.

Tenets of the Kebra Nagast story existed in Ethiopian oral history as early as the year 600 AD (Levine, 1974). However, its production as a book gave the story a literary authority which became the concerted national chorus of church and state, without which it was impossible for the emperors of Ethiopia to rule in their country. In fact, a significant part of the story is presented in the Quran as well (Quran, 27:22-44, Sahih International). The significant influence that the Kebra Nagast had in Ethiopia was recognised by several authors. Jones & Monroe (1955, p. 20) noted that “belief in the legend has continued to flourish down to modern times”. They also emphasised that “[t]he royal copy of the Kebra Nagast came to be regarded with superstitious reverence” (Jones & Monroe, 1955, p. 20). Buxton (1970, p. 130) witnessed that it “became a national saga of the country, in which every citizen believed implicitly”. Silvia Pankhurst’s (1955, p. 100) observation suggested the dual purposes of the Kebra Nagast. On the one side, it aimed at consolidating the existing historical and religious beliefs in Ethiopia in to a single authoritative text that anchored the destiny of the people. On the other hand, it established core ethical values that would guide the action of the King and his followers. Kebede (2006, p. 7) considered that “the Kebra Nagast is a national epic” that anchored the unity of church and state, as well as the synthesis between the secular and the religious, as the best guarantee for “the survival of Christian Ethiopia in a hostile environment dominated by heathen and powerful Muslim countries”. Since it became the basis for a “nationalist ideology”, it served to establish the source, legitimacy and validity of state power in Ethiopia (Kebede, 2008a, p. 168-169).

Donald Levine (1974) argued that the Kebra Nagast was an established source of national identity. It was “the foundation of the nation of Ethiopia with particular significance and destiny” and the means of “defending the worth of the national identity so established” (Levine, 1974). According to Levine (1974, p. 107)

Its appeal transcends the claims of any parochial loyalties in Ethiopia. It glorifies no tribe, no religion, no linguistic group, but the Ethiopian nation under her monarch. It declares this nation superior to all others...provides a mandate for the Ethiopian kingdom to expand its dominion in the name of the Lord of Hosts.

Jones and Monroe (1955, pp. 16-18) identified three possible reasons for the motive behind the writing of the book. The first was the desire of Ethiopians to claim their ancient existence. They argue that “Parvenu peoples, like parvenu individuals, hanker after ancestors, and peoples have as little scruple in forging family trees as have individuals” (Jones & Monroe, 1955, p. 16). Like the Romans who alluded to themselves the antiquity of Greece through Virgil’s Aeneas at a time when Romans were confronted by the Greece legacy, so did the Ethiopians invented the Kebra Nagast to claim ancient existence at a time when they came into contact with the civilization of the Christian East. The second motive Jones and Monroe (1955) presented was the interest of Ethiopians to claim for themselves the alluring promise that God made to Israelites. Like the Saxon’s claim for heredity from Isaac, or the British Empire from the promised land, so were Ethiopians “moved by the same desire, concocted a legend which is at any rate more plausible than the theories of the British Israelites” (Jones & Monroe, 1955, p. 17). The third motive was “the desire of the royal house of Abyssinia to assert their divine right to the throne” (Jones & Monroe, 1955, p. 18). Russell (1833) made similar remarks regarding the book. He accepted the internalisation of the Kebra Nagast by the people but rejected the truthfulness of its story.

It [the Kebra Nagast] is regarded indeed by the natives as a faithful repository of their ancient history; though the slightest attention to it will convince the reader that it is the production of an ignorant monk, who used the Septuagint translation of the Bible as the groundwork of a ridiculous fable, with the sole view

of ministering to the vanity of his countrymen (Russell, 1833, p. 91).

What is commonly recognised among these authors is that the book served as an instrument of self-definition for Ethiopians in relation to the world. As witnessed by Ullendorff, the *Kebra Nagast* “is the repository of Ethiopian national and religious feelings, perhaps the truest and most genuine expression of Abyssinian Christianity” (Ullendorff, 1965, p. 144). However, two important remarks should be made on how the story of the *Kebra Nagast* is presented above. First, there is controversy over the historicity of the facts in the book (Munro-Hay, 2001). Secondly, the *Kebra Nagast* was evaluated from the perspective of Western scholars who focused on state and politics more than on culture and society. This disproportionate focus gave little insight into the cultural and religious meaning the people attached to the text. Thus, part of the attempt in this work is to understand and interpret the internal logic behind the meaning of the text from below.

Jones & Monroe’s (1955, p. 20) consideration of the book as a mere concocted legend sheds little light on the reason why, as they rightly indicated, the “*Kebra Nagast* came to be regarded with a superstitious reverence”. Jones & Monroe simply considered the text in terms of how Ethiopian monarchs used it to define the country as a nation in order to protect themselves from the foreshadowing threats of the Judaic religion and the Byzantine Empire (Levine, 1974, p. 104). In addition, as argued by Crummey (1979), “class and cultural prejudices are rampant throughout [Jones and Monroe’s] book manifesting themselves in a rich variety of pejorative adjectives”. While considering the importance of the book of the *Kebra Nagast* as an expression of national identity as provided in the top-down perspective above, my interpretation of some aspects of the text in the *Kebra Nagast* focuses on the values that sustained social and political relationships among the people. For this reason, the academic controversies surrounding the origin of the book or the authenticity of its translations from an alleged Arabian source, or the truthfulness of the story of Queen of Sheba and the Ark of the Covenant

are not considered relevant in this research.<sup>2</sup> What is considered important is the significance of the content of the book in framing social consciousness and organising political life in Ethiopia. In this regard, I concur with Wagaw's (1990, p. 50) position that:

Whether this tale [the story in the book of the Kebra Nagast] has some factual basis or not is a moot question; what is important is that the work was believed by the leaders and the led alike, and provided some guidance and served as the foundation for legitimizing the beliefs and actions of state, monarchy, and church until recent times.

The above discussion shows the existence of general consensus regarding the significance of the Kebra Nagast as "the repository of Ethiopia's national and religious feelings" (Ullendorff, 1965, p. 144). The existence of this indigenous ideological source challenges the thesis of Africa's Otherness: Its "absence" or "lack" or "nothingness" that has been attributed to Africa's ideological formation (Mbembe, 2001; Mudimbe, 1988). The next section analyses key concepts in the Kebra Nagast that embodied the basis of Ethiopia's indigenous nationalism and its unique source of political and social integration for centuries.

### **3.3. COVENANT: THE IDEOLOGY OF VERTICAL INTEGRATION**

Countries have various myths and symbols that attempt to totalise and express forms of collective aspirations and interests. Flags, anthems, monuments, emblems, and sacred objects or places represent important identity concepts that are protected by law (Befu, 1992). Hoffer (1951, p. 5) argued that Japanese and European – especially German –

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<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion about the controversy over these and the Ark of the Covenant see Leeman, B. (2010). "The Ark of the Covenant: Evidence Supporting the Ethiopian Traditions." Retrieved 29/07/2012, from <http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/amharic/holybooks/arkofthecovenant.pdf>. Also, Munro-Hay, S. C. (2005). *The Quest for the Ark of the Covenant*. London, I.B. Tauris.

nationalisms, as well as the revival of Asia are largely made possible by the use of strong nationalism. The Japanese notion of *Nihonjinron*, which embodied the ideology of the cultural uniqueness of the Japanese, embedded all aspects of their social, economic, scientific, cultural, and political discourses (Yoshino, 1992). The idea of God's election of Israel has been considered to answer the question of Jewish identity (Novak, 1995). Hoffer (1951, p. 5) viewed Zionism as "an instrument for the renovation of a backward country"; and, "religiofication" as "the art of turning practical purposes into holy causes". What turns a piece of rug into a solemn flag, or an object into a sacred emblem is the purposive faith that attaches these things to honourable human causes.

In Ethiopia, the belief in the destiny of Ethiopia as the chosen nation of God served as a formidable foundation for the sustenance of the state for several centuries. The Ark of the Covenant was believed as the living proof of this messianic destiny. The detail of this belief is contained in the book of the Kebra Nagast which declared that:

[T]he chosen ones of the lord are the people of Ethiopia. For there is the habitation of God, the heavenly Zion, the Tabernacle of His Law and the Tabernacle of His Covenant, which He hath made into a mercy-seat through [His] mercy for the children of men; for the rains and the waters from the sky, for the planted things... and the fruits, for the peoples and the countries, for the kings and nobles, for men and beasts, for birds and creeping things (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 144).

Ethiopia's distinguishing mark for being a chosen nation rested in the meaning and significance of Covenant. The Kebra Nagast presents Covenant as a solemn and most venerated expression of a sacred will. Before addressing the importance of this concept to Ethiopia, the concept of Covenant as understood by traditional scholars and based on the Kebra Nagast will be outlined.

Two purposive meanings could be drawn from the concept of Covenant: the veneration of the Ethiopian nation as a sacred entity, and the setting up of a higher standard for political and social integration among the people. An Orthodox Church

scholar at Lalibela explained to me that Covenant /*kalkidan*/ is a sacred foundation for all actions in heaven and earth (Interview, 14 April, 2011). The idea of Covenant could be seen as a solemn promise or true agreement that should not be abandoned or broken by any earthly power or reason. Two types of Covenants that could be discerned from this concept are presented in the Kebra Nagast. The first one is God's Covenant that belongs to the transcendental and spiritual realm of eternal agreement, or according the Kebra Nagast, the agreement made among the Trinity in heaven right before the beginning of creation. The second is the human Covenants or the agreements that exist in human society. The first Covenant is the ideal, and the perfect original that should inspire the perfection of human Covenants on earth.

According to a church scholar at Lalibela, the Covenant of God– the agreement among the Trinity<sup>3</sup>– is the supreme agreement enacted by God himself at the beginning of creation (Interview, 14 April, 2011). This is where the Ethiopian tradition introduces an important distinction from the Bible. The first verse of the Book of Genesis in the Bible declares that “in the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth”. This makes action, which is the act of creating in this case, the beginning of creation. However, the Kebra Nagast emphasises the agreement made among the Trinity *before* the act of creating took place. Hence, the book canonises /solemnises/ Covenant or agreement as a starting point for any venerable action. The Kebra Nagast provides for the first Covenant as an agreement made among the Trinity in “the City of Zion”:

For the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit with good fellowship and right good will and cordial *agreement* together made Heavenly Zion to be the place of habitation of their Glory... and with ready *agreement* and good will They were all of this opinion ... and this common *agreement* and *Covenant* was [fulfilled] in Zion, the City of their Glory” (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 1 emphasis added).

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<sup>3</sup> Although the Trinity is commonly regarded as a New Testament (Christian) concept, the Kebra Nagast introduces the concept of Trinity in the Old Testament, making the Father, The Son, and the Holy Ghost parties for the creation of Covenant.



Here the agreement among the Trinity expresses the will of God for the Heavenly Zion to become the habitation of their glory. The City of Zion was presented as a receptacle, a tabernacle and a place that carries the Glory of God. Its creation was done based on prior consent or agreement among the Trinity, a concept that does not exist in the Biblical story. The idea of consent introduces an important distinction between thought and action, or will and performance. The expression of “right good will” or agreement becomes the starting point of action, and the creation of the Tabernacle of the Covenant the blueprint or archetype of creation. The Kebra Nagast presents the testimony of the Three Hundred Eighteen Orthodox Fathers to support this:

Behold now, we understand clearly that before every created thing, even the angels, and before the heavens and the earth, He created the Tabernacle of the Covenant, and this which is in heaven goeth about upon the earth (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 7).

Thus, before the creation of all things, God made the heavenly Zion and the Tabernacle of the Covenant for the holy seat of his glory which is to become the source and model of the glory of kings in the future. The meaning of Covenant as provided in the Kebra Nagast enables human beings to reach the unreachable realm of spirituality: it links the spiritual and the physical world. A spiritual teacher noted,

The Covenant of the Trinity is the embodiment of God’s solemn promise – his very existence in His own word – which is his own existence in himself. This transcendental existence gained a concrete form and expression through the Tabernacle of the Covenant which served as a conduit to express God, or to bring God himself to human beings. Thus, God occupied a space: He embodied himself in his Covenant and brought his own presence and his gifts of protection, redemption, and forgiveness near to human beings. The Tabernacle of the Covenant became the

symbol of His throne, or the sign and the seal for His eternal presence at the centre of the universe (Interview, 14 April, 2011).

The Kebra Nagast (1932, p. 10) emphasises that it was created “for a mercy seat and for the salvation of men...It was made by the mind of God and not by hand of the artificer, man, but He Himself created it for the habitation of His Glory”. Then, God used His Covenant to create the world. During *kidasse* (mass), the priest prays recognising this as “who by word of Thy covenant hast created all things, for in him Thou art well pleased” (Rodwell, 1864, p. 28). Here, I believe it is important to appreciate the conception of the Ark of the Covenant as *place* from where the world was created, and a place where mercy is seated. According to Casey (1993, p. 19), “There is no creation without place. Cosmo-genesis is not from no-place to place but from less determinate to more determinate places. Furthermore, Casey (1993, p. 18) argued that “If things and ultimately the world-whole were indeed created, then they will have to be brought into being (from) somewhere. The exact character of this somewhere differs from cosmology to cosmology” (Casey, 1993, p. 18). From this perspective, we cannot understand the possibility of creation without the existence of place prior to it; place is the only origin and constant. “[T]he Hebrew word *Makom*, the name of God, means precisely Place” (Casey, 1993, p. 17). God, by his ability to hold the world became a place for the world. In Ethiopia, the equivalent name for God is *Egzia’biher* which means God of country or place. The Covenant is that place where God chose to emplace himself in order to create the world. Once the world is created, “He brought it down to the earth, and permitted Moses to make the likeness of it”. “Moses made the Ark in the guidance of God and brought it into the land of inheritance, which is Jerusalem, the City of Zion” (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 12-17).

Seating at the city of Jerusalem, in the great temple made by King Solomon, the Ark became the sign of Israel’s messianic destiny, and its mark of being the chosen nation of God during the Old Testament. However, according to the Kebra Nagast, God’s will changed in favour of Ethiopia and allowed the son of the high priest of Israel, together with the male firstborns of the noblemen of Israel to move the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia. The people of Israel cried for several days and told their King:

“Zion has taken up her abode with thy firstborn and she shall be the salvation of the people of Ethiopia forever” (Kebra Nagast, 1932).

The coming of the Ark of the Covenant marked the elevation of Ethiopia to the favour of God. The Ethiopian king accepted the Ark of the Covenant, outlawed pagan beliefs, and installed the Ten Commandments as the law of the nation. On the other hand, Solomon, the King of Israel, violated the first rule of the Ten Commandments, and worshipped the idols of Egypt (Kebra Nagast, 1932). Moreover, in the New Testament, God foresaw that unlike Ethiopians, Israelites would reject Jesus without which they would cease to become the chosen people of God.

Thus, the Kebra-Nagast’s dramatic story of how the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Ethiopia during the Old Testament, and how Israel, due to its rejection of Jesus ceased to be the chosen nation during the new Testament and how Ethiopia became *The Second Israel* – the final *place* of habitation for the sacred Ark of the Covenant– became the discursive basis of Ethiopia’s ideology of choiceness. In the Hagiographic book of King Lalibela, God was quoted to have told the king: ‘ወአንትሙሂ ፍቁራንዩ ህዝብ ዘምከህ ዘትሰመዩ እስራኤል ሐዲሳን’, which means “you [Ethiopians] are called the new Israelites, the people I love and am proud of” (Gedle Lalibela, 2001, p. 10). The most important aspect of this messianic destiny was its translation into political and social life. There are three important concepts that relate the idea of covenant with the ideology of political and social life. These include the notion of the ideal king rule, the notion of the messianic destiny of Ethiopia, and the notion of centre.

### ***3.3.1. The notion of the Ideal King rule***

Covenant can be regarded as the foundation of a solemn relationship. As noted above, the heavenly covenant or agreement to make Zion the seat of the Glory of God revealed a relationship among the trinity. In the same way, covenant symbolised the foundation of a nation. Traditional scholars emphasise that through a solemn covenant, the nation is regarded as the seat for the glory of the ideal king (Interview, 12 April, 2013). The ideal king is imagined as a representative of the divine authority and the virtuous characteristics of God on earth. This is illustrated in the coronation ceremony of a new king (Isaac, 2013, p. 137).

The ceremony of inaugurating anew emperor was purely religious and liturgical. It opens with the reading of Psalm 122. Then the Patriarch, in the presence of leading ecclesiastics, places the crown upon the monarch, seated on a throne, and says: “May God grant that this crown be a halo of holiness and glory. May you be pure in heart even as this gold is pure.” To this blessing, the emperor replies, “Amen.” ... The emperor is given a sword known as the “Sword of Solomon,” with the exhortation: ““By this sword execute true justice, protect the Church, the widows, and the orphans, restore that which needs to be restored, chastise the wicked, render honour to the righteous; and with it serve our saviour Jesus Christ.

As noted above, Covenant underscored the importance of consent, the deliverance of God’s laws and mercy to his subjects. The King participates in divine authority by keeping the ethical standards attached to his power. As God has given his people law and mercy through the Covenant, so was the king expected to administer the people based on justice and compassion. To carry out his function, the ideal king was expected to display his life at the intersection of vertical and horizontal virtues. Vertically, he was expected to remain connected with the power and the promise that the Covenant symbolised. Horizontally, he was expected to pursue and maintain wisdom in his relationship with his subjects. This implies that the “divine power” of the king was not synonymous with unlimited power. The exercise of power was subjected to predictable ethical principles without which the king would be an instrument of evil.

The Kebra Nagast underscores virtue as a condition for the exercise of the King’s power by presenting the main figures of the ancient world in the Bible as Kings who set exemplary leadership for succeeding kings. The book presented two types of Kings. The first were those who did not transgress the commandment of God. Such kings were considered wise, gracious, pure in body and soul. Consequently, they defeated their enemies, rendered justice for their subjects, passed their kingdom to their succeeding

generations, and died in honour (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 10). Those rulers who transgressed the commandment of God were cursed, lost their legitimacy to rule, and their children became “leprous and scabby”, and suffered various consequences. The message behind the text was intended to show that the King was anointed to rule in the likeness of God. The source of his authority was God (Sumner, 1981, p. 39), and he was responsible to rule in accordance with the laws and values of Covenant for he is king only through God.

### ***3.3.2. The Notion of the Messianic Destiny of Ethiopia***

This subsection will consider the basis of the belief in the messianic destiny of Ethiopia to show the ideological contribution of this belief to the independence of the nation as the only African state that successfully defended its freedom from European colonial administration.<sup>4</sup> As presented above, the belief in the coming of the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia created the notion of messianic nation. The main idea of this belief was articulated by a traditional education scholar whom I met in Lalibela:

The conception of Ethiopia’s messianic destiny could be contrasted with the apocalyptic destiny of the world. While other nations in the world may wallow in despair and confusion, we believe that Ethiopia will remain forever because she holds in its soil the Ark of the Covenant, which is the most powerful assurance of God’s protection till the end of the world (Interview, 14 April, 2011).

The view of the external world as dangerous, cruel and destined to an apocalyptic end is part of the classic view of eschatology which Ethiopia had adopted from Christian Millenarianism (Kebede, 2008a, p. 118). Frost (1952, p. 70) considered eschatological thought as “a form of expectation which is characterized by finality”. The most important element in eschatology is the endlessness of the end. It is the view of a

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<sup>4</sup> It should be remembered that Ethiopia was occupied by the forces of Italy’s Mussolini for five years during the Second World War.

time process devoid of unfolding events; a time “beyond which the faithful never peers” (Frost, 1952, p. 70). With regard to Millenarianism, what is emphasised is “the ultimate transformation of the world in a sense that no further improvement could be made” (Hamilton, 2001, p. 12). Hence, Millenarianism is characterised by an eschatological view of time: the conception of salvation characterised by absolute finality and total redemption from the evil in the world.

Marxists interpreted this Millenarian belief as an expression of the resistance of the oppressed peoples of various cultures against the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire (Hamilton, 2001, p. 16). What has called upon the belief of these people in Millenarian salvation was their total and seemingly unending depredation under the power of an enemy against which they had little hope to revolt and win by their own means (Hamilton, 2001, p. 16). Thus, absolute salvation is a conception that is believed to follow its absence; it comes in the aftermath of absolute domination. However, until salvation is unfolded on a plane of eschatology, the world remains in the infernal circuit of opposing forces: good and evil, life and death, slavery and freedom, poverty and riches. Change in this context is simply an exchange between opposite categories.

Kebede (2008a, p. 117) articulated this change in terms of reversal, “what appears as new is actually nothing more than how opposites alternate”. You may be rich but it is nothing because you will undoubtedly become poor one day, you may be healthy but you would fall sick, you may be happy but you will undoubtedly be sad, and you may be alive but you will die. It is the nature of the world, the condition of fate (*yedil guday*) for every earthly life to end up in apocalypse. It is within the context of this depressing view of life that the Ark of the Covenant becomes a significantly important asset for the protection of Ethiopia. Kebede (2008a, p. 118) argues that

The belief that things are caught in a macabre movement of rotation highlights the unique role of the *kibra Nagast* with its promise of an exceptional destiny to Ethiopia. The myth protects Ethiopia from the law of alteration in that it guarantees the final victory of Christian Ethiopia over all its enemies.

Kebede's (2008a) emphasis on the fall of time and everything within it under the apocalyptic fate of the macabre cycle illustrates the mentality of Ethiopian elites who enacted Marxism Leninism to act in the eschatological image/analogy of God. Nevertheless, it is also interesting to examine to what extent this belief leaves room for the individual or society to play a role in the process of alteration. God may not be called upon to change the macabre nature of the world, but he could certainly be asked to grant protection, strength or willpower to society or the individual in the face of ongoing alterations. The individual or society at large should observe certain rituals such as prayers, sacrifices, fasting, feeding the hungry, observing holydays, rendering justice etc. in order to avoid disastrous consequences (*meqisefit*) (Interview, 20 April, 2011). Within this role, we could find the rich legacy of traditional practices, rituals, prayers, myths that could become rich sources of knowledge and experience for succeeding generations. Therefore, myths and the observance of certain rituals could be considered as attempts to invite the Divine to intervene on one's behalf.

Myth in its earliest conception was considered as a form of speculative thought that asserts a certain truth that lies beyond the foreseeable realm of human experience (Frost, 1952, p. 70). It can be translated into various types of rituals that allow human beings to perform their part for the smooth running of the cycle of life. Although that cycle is destined to an apocalyptic end as the Christian belief in the end days of the world suggests, human beings nevertheless have a fundamental role to play to 'lubricate its motion' (Frost, 1952, p. 71). Hence, whether one believes the true faith or not, whether he/she prays or not, gives alms to the poor or not, sins or not plays an important role in the movement of alternates. In the Kebra Nagast, there are reasons provided as to why Ham was cursed, why Adam had fallen, and why the Kingdom of Israel and Rome lost the favour of God. Lamenting on the departure of the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia, Solomon blamed the role Israelites played to their own disgrace as:

[O]f our own free will we have polluted our life. He made us very wise, and of our own free will we have made ourselves more foolish than the beasts (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 80).

For Ethiopians, the Kebra Nagast was a messianic truth that enabled them to act in order to keep the promise that they were given by God. The possession of the Ark of the Covenant by Ethiopia, and the learning and practicing of wisdom by the King and his people, was considered significantly important to keep the good favour of God to act on behalf of the nation and its people. In this situation, although death and the apocalyptic end of the earth are unavoidable, they can nevertheless be delayed for the possible long time. The macabre cycle stops only with the end of the world, and the dawning of heaven with absolute finality.

The notion of the chosen people could be regarded as threatening to the equality of the nations and of the cultures within the nation. In fact, some countries had applied it to emphasise God's role in politics, and to justify sufferings, losses and atrocities in the name of a higher destiny. In Germany, the protestant belief in the Covenant between God and the German nation was used to justify "the annihilation of those labelled by the Nazis not fit to be proper or healthy members of the German nation" (Lehmann, 1991, p. 270). Similarly, early Afrikaners believed that the Boers were a chosen people who shared an identity inherited from the Old Testament type Calvinism with "a mandate to smite the heathen" (Du Toit, 1983; Moodie, 1980, p. 3). Despite the role that it played to consolidate the power of the King over ethnic groups, the Ethiopian claim for messianic destiny was significantly different from the German and Boer claims of being chosen.

While it is impossible to rule out that the Ethiopian conception of the chosen nation had contributed to the expansion of the empire to the southern parts of the country (Levine, 1974), this does not fully illustrate the influence of the conception. There were stories of forceful conversion of the Wollo Muslims into Christianity during the Reign of Yohannis IV, and instances of severe repression of southern ethnic resistance against the supremacy of the central imperial state. However, it is important to consider that, at least at the level of ideology, the Ethiopian conception of covenant was presented as a practice of wisdom- interpreted in the Kebra Nagast as humility, compassion and justice- rather than as a licence for the free exercise of brute force. A good example is to see how Islam had been treated by the official Christian Ethiopian Empire.

With the exception of the 14 years of the *jihad* war of Ahmad Gran to destroy the Solomonic Empire (1529–1543), and the forceful attempt to convert the Wollo Muslims



to Christianity by Yohannis IV, the social relationship between followers of Orthodox Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia could generally be considered as peaceful and tolerant (Jon Abbink, 1998). Long before his followers were accepted as refugees in Axum, the Prophet Muhammad was said to have spoken of Ethiopia as “a country where no one is wronged, a land of righteousness” (Pankhurst, 1993, p. 21). When his followers were prosecuted, he advised them to flee to Christian Ethiopia because “[i]t is a land of righteousness where God will give you relief from what you are suffering” (Quoted in Trimingham, 1965, p. 44). The *Adulis inscription* which was written in Greek in 150 A.D in Ethiopia confirms that territorial expansion was based on the restoration of local leaders to power subject to the payment of tribute to the central state (Tamrat, 1993, p. 40). The devout Christian King Amda Zeyon, whose name could be translated as the pillar of Zion, was reported to have said, “I am the emperor of all the Muslims in the land of Ethiopia” (Tamrat, 1993, p. 41). Kaplan (1984) noted that, the conversion of the ethnic minorities to Christianity emphasised “continuity rather than dramatic change”.

Converts were expected to accept a new religion which was more powerful than their previous faiths but didn't claim to differ from them in essence. No attempt was made to change their political system or reform their social customs. Neither did Christianity represent a foreign culture or bring with it disruptive changes (Kaplan, 1984, p. 124).

A traditional scholar explained to me that the wisdom of the Kings to spare rather than to destroy, to include rather than to isolate non-orthodox believers in their empire enabled the people of Ethiopia to develop tolerant views towards Islam (Interview, 20 March, 2011). Still today, with significant Christian and Muslim population<sup>5</sup> (CSA, 2009), there is a considerable cultural practice that unites more than divides Christian and Muslim believers in the country. Followers of both religions

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<sup>5</sup> According to the 2007 census, the Orthodox Christian population was 43.5%, and the Protestant Christian was 18.6%. The Muslim population was 33.9%, and other indigenous religions accounted for 2.6% of the total population. Population and Housing Census Report-Country - 2007, *Central Statistical Agency, 2010-07, English [eng], Ethiopia [eth]* Publisher(s): Central Statistical Agency [Doc\Reports\National\\_Statistical.pdf](#)

practice burial ceremonies, wedding ceremonies, and *equb* /traditional saving/, and cooperate in social and cultural life together. Despite the existence of tolerance and cooperative spirit in social life among the population, it should be admitted that Islam has generally been treated as an inferior religion to Orthodox Christianity (Abbink, 1998).

Another contribution of the Kebra Nagast is its significant role to mobilise Ethiopians to form a sacred covenant or agreement for the defence of their nation. The feeling of nationalism was expressed in culture such as poetry, music, dance etc. Ethiopia has been surrounded by powerful Moslem rivals for centuries. Since the rise of Mehemet Ali in 1805, Ethiopia had to battle against Egyptian expansionist interests who sought to control the source of the Blue Nile. This was significantly important especially with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 where Khedive Ismail of Egypt tried to invade Ethiopia with the support of American and European officers, and was defeated at the battle of Gundet and Gura in 1875 and 1876, respectively.

The defence of the ideology of the chosen people was effective not only against Muslim invaders but also against Christian colonisers. Ethiopia had been defiant of the European scramble for Africa. European “cosmopolitan adventurers who tried to trick the natives ...found themselves tricked” (Waugh & Hamilton, 2007, p. 34). The King of Ethiopia “was no savage chief to whom any white face was a divine or a diabolic portent” (Waugh & Hamilton, 2007, p. 19). The psychological uplifting that the Kebra Nagast promoted was so immense that the Ethiopians never turned to look up to any other nation as superior than theirs. This attitude was contemptuous to European superiority

The essence of the offence [committed by Abyssinians] was that the Abyssinians, in spite of being by any possible standard an inferior race, persisted in behaving as superiors; it was not that they were hostile [to Europeans], but contemptuous. The white man, accustomed to other parts of Africa, was disgusted to find the first-class carriages on the railway usurped by local dignitaries; he found himself subjected to official and villainous-

looking men at arms whose language he did not know, who showed him not the smallest reluctance to using force on him if he became truculent (Waugh & Hamilton, 2007, p. 35).

In 1896, the declaration of war against Italian colonial expedition was a call of the entire population to fight for the sake of family and faith. The *tabot* (replica of the Ark of the Covenant) was carried to the war front with the army. The victory of Ethiopia over Rome was prophesised and believed based on the status of the Ethiopian church and King against the Roman church and King. In the Kebra Nagast, although the Roman Empire was recognised as a counterpart of the Ethiopian Empire, it was disgraced for accepting the false teachings of Nistros making only Ethiopia the bearer of the true belief in Christ. Therefore, before the battle had begun, the war was considered as a battle between the chosen empire of Ethiopia and the fallen empire of Rome. The following prophetic poem (*qine*) translated into English by Silvia Pankhurst (1955, p. 258) was sung in Addis Ababa for Menelik as victorious and ‘a saviour of the world’:

Gomorraah and Sodom, lands of retribution,  
shall find pardon on the terrible day of battle.  
But you, base city of Rome,  
That has come up on you which did not come upon Sodom;  
For Menelik, saviour of the world,  
Has sent you swathed in blood to visit Dathan and Abiram in the  
grave;  
And he will not leave even one of your seed to bear your name;  
for remembering the counsel of Samuel of old,  
And knowing that the punishment of Saul was due to his  
disobedience in sparing Agag;  
He has sworn that the sword in his hand shall exterminate every  
grain of your seed.

The above poem shows that the victory of Ethiopia over Italy was certainly believed and was even celebrated before the war took place at Adowa.

### **3.3.3. *The Notion of Centre***

The relationship between the Ark of the Covenant and the notion of centre and place is important. In this study, centre represents a special place within a place, a location of prime significance, a symbol of moral power and ideals. In the biblical tradition, the Ark of the Covenant was placed at the centre of Solomon's Temple (1 King 6: 19). According to Philip Gardiner (2007, p. 65) the notion of centre was the most important concept in the ritual of freemasonry. A traditional education scholar from Lalibela outlined that during the Old Testament, due to the existence of the Ark of the Covenant at the Temple of Solomon, Jerusalem had been imagined as *maekele midir* which means the "centre of the earth" (Interview, 10 April, 2011). However, the centre moved with the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia. In this regard, it is believed that the building of the monolithic churches of Lalibela was intended to "reproduce" a Jerusalem in Ethiopia (Kaplan, 1984, p. 20).

In the Ethiopian Tewahido church, which is the social centre of life in most rural villages in Ethiopia, the replica of the Ark of the Covenant (tabot) is placed at the centre, in the Sanctum Sanctorum (Holy of Holies). Centre is considered as fullness, and was used to portray the faces of angels and saints to represent the fullness of grace bestowed upon them by the divine (Interview, 12 April, 2011). A circular position is also used to maintain the fullness of participants in a meeting or in sharing a meal. At home, at the centre of every centre lies the head of the family, or the leader who is accessible to and connected with everyone who belongs. At the centre of the nation stands the King who is crowned to rule in accordance with the laws of the Ark of the Covenant.

The concept of centre underscores the notion of belonging. It is important as a way of showing the need to be rooted in a place, or in a cultural context and to be connected with the origin in order to draw purpose from it and reach out to the world to nourish the source (Interview, 28 March, 2011). The individual exists as a relational being, bearing a name that has some sort of significant meaning to the family or the

community, and observing traditional practices that are commonly accepted. Thus, the notion of centre is important in political and social life as it instils a sense of belonging and identity that creates families, communities, and regions as interconnected parts of a single nation. Due to the belief in the presence of the Ark for the Covenant, the nation is imagined as the centre of the world whose interest and values supersedes the interest and values of other nations or entities.

### **3.4. WISDOM: THE IDEOLOGY OF HORIZONTAL INTERACTION**

This sub section will analyse how wisdom is conceptualised by analysing it from various contexts of Ethiopian perspectives including the meaning of wisdom, the sources of wisdom, wisdom and the non-essentiality of the other, and wisdom as an attribute of the humility of the self, as the basis of knowledge and reality, and as a limit in the exercise of absolute power. The concept of wisdom presented here centres on the text of the Kebra Nagast, the teaching of traditional education schools at Lalibela and the cultural practice of the local people.

#### ***3.4.1. The meaning of Wisdom***

One of the important values embodied in the Kebra Nagast is wisdom. In fact, the story of the Queen of Sheba itself is a story about the pursuit of wisdom. In this study, I follow the interpretation of wisdom based on the Kebra Nagast and the perspective of traditional scholars at the research site. The Queen of Sheba in dialogue with her followers spoke, “blessed is the man who knoweth wisdom, that is to say compassion and the fear of God” (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 24-27). Thus, the meaning of wisdom is embodied in two concepts: the fear of God, and compassion which can also be regarded as humility. During her preparation to travel to Jerusalem, the Queen of Sheba told her nobles in the Kebra Nagast (1932, p. 20-24):

Hearken, O ye who are my people, and give ye ear to my words.  
For I desire wisdom and my heart seekth to find understanding. I  
am smitten with the love of wisdom. .... wisdom is far better than  
treasure of gold and silver, and wisdom is the best of everything  
that hath been created on the earth...It maketh the ears to hear and  
hearts to understand, it is a source of joy for the heart, and a  
bright and shining lamp for the eyes; it is a teacher of those who  
learned, ...As for a kingdom, it cannot stand without wisdom..  
And because of the wickedness of those who do evil the  
righteous are praised and because of the wicked acts of fools the  
wise are beloved. ...

Her nobles, and her slaves, and her handmaidens, and her counsellors answered  
and said unto her:

O our lady, as for wisdom it is not lacking in thee; and it is  
because of your wisdom that thou loves wisdom. And to for us, if  
thou goest, we will go with thee, if thou sits down we will sit  
down with thee; our death shall be thy death, and our life with thy  
life

In the queen's speech, wisdom is accorded the greatest significance: the search  
for wisdom is seen as equivalent to the search for "the best of everything that hath been  
created on the earth" (Kebra Nagast, 1932). This perspective and the Queen's long  
journey in search of wisdom inspired the generation of Ethiopian youngsters to leave  
their villages and travel long distances in search of scholars who would teach them the  
great mysteries that are buried in the numerous books of the church. A total study of all  
courses would take more than twenty eight years, and there is little or no material benefit  
a person would acquire as a result of such a lifelong learning (Wagaw, 1990). Another  
important point is the belief that the more a person becomes wise in this respect the  
more that person seeks wisdom. Thus, wisdom was conceived as an endless journey  
towards the boundless knowledge of the creator: it was conceived as 'a teacher of those  
who learned'. What is significant about this journey was not the attainment of book  
learning or knowledge as an end, but the practice of wisdom in daily life. Wisdom was

viewed as a trainer of the senses; as light for the eyes. “It make the ears to hear and hearts to understand”, and orients reason towards justice (Kebra Nagast, 1932).

A similar conception of wisdom is common in Ethiopian philosophical manuscripts. The wise philosopher in the Book of Eskendes was asked about the meaning of wisdom and answered:

Wisdom is...the eye of the soul; it sees all that is concealed and secret. It calls knowledge conscience. It inquires into the wonders of the High God light that fills the soul (Sumner, 1981, p. 54).

The view of wisdom as a trainer of the senses, and as the practicing of compassion in human social relationships suggests that wisdom has a supreme source that exists beyond the cognitive faculties of the human body.

#### **3.4.2. *The source of wisdom***

Literary and oral expressions suggest that the originator of wisdom is God, but human beings play a significant role in obtaining it. God provides not only knowledge but also the desire to know, and the ability to understand. The journey of Queen of Sheba to King Solomon with Seven Hundred Ninety Seven loads of camel was presented as a quest for wisdom. It was believed that the initiator of that quest was God ‘for God had made her heart incline to go and had made her desire it’ (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 19). The Queen spoke:

I went in through the doors of the treasury of wisdom, and I drew for myself the waters of understanding....and not myself only, but all the men of my country, the kingdom of Ethiopia; and not those only, but the nations that are round about

Here, wisdom is viewed as a finished product stored in God’s treasury. It is not the outcome of individual ingenuity alone but a gift only God can give to his chosen and trusted ones. According to the Kebra Nagast, Solomon’s wisdom was a gift from God.

That gift was taken away when he was seduced by the daughter of Pharaoh to worship the Egyptian idols. He was turned from wise to fool, from rich to poor, and from king to “a man of no account” (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 66-91). The acquisition of wisdom is not the accumulation of knowledge in the mind, but the ability to submit the senses to the practice of the highest ideals in society. A wise person does not own knowledge as a personal property; instead, he uses it to live a life of service recognizing God as the source of all knowledge.

In *Arganona Mariyam*, a book that praises Mary with a series of metaphorical anaphora, the author claims that in order to reveal the glory of the Virgin he had to surrender his senses and listen to the glory that is unfolding before him. The glory is already written, the song already sung long before he became aware of it, and the creator was the giver and the receiver of that glory. In order to reveal it, the author starts with prayer pleading the divine to open his heart and ears and to enable him to listen to the glory of Mary from the mouth of the Holy Ghost. The individual does not invent or even articulate his own message. He merely reveals to the world the knowledge that God had revealed to him/her in private.

The view of knowledge is related to the view of the human being as an embodiment of flesh and soul that are often opposite to each other. In the Ethiopian traditional education, students study that the soul and the flesh were created with seven characteristics (Wagaw, 1990, p. 37-38). The four characteristics belonged to the flesh while the three were that of the soul.

The characteristics of the flesh include wind, fire, water and soil. From birth to 15 years old a person lives as wind- fast, wild and less articulate but joyful. From the age of 15 to 30 as fire: strong, emotional, sexually active, and even sometimes dangerous. From the age of 30 to 60 the person lives as water: calm, reflective, witty, and capable of rendering decisions regarding the community. After the age of 60 the person reaches the soil stage of life when walking on the soil is even impossible without support.



This teaching is so internalised in most communities that even a strong and angry young person (fire) would calm down to listen to what an older person (water) has to say. The sayings, water extinguishes fire /“*wuha essatt yaberidal*” /and “Age is judge” /*edimae dagna newul*/, are among the common set of maxims that explain this point. As shown above, while the flesh provides the physical timeline of the person with variables that belonged to the earth, the soul is considered to have three sets of characteristics that belonged to the spirit or God.

The three characteristics of the soul are the ability to think/reason (*lebawinet*), to speak (*nebabinet*) and to live forever (*hiyawunet*). Thus, knowledge is the property of the soul, as Wagaw (1990, p. 38) maintained:

Knowledge, skill, eloquence, and the gift of prophecy are acquired by the soul through the spirit of the Almighty. It follows, therefore, that in the act of learning the teacher plays a vital role as intermediary between the Spirit of God and the learner. The teacher’s position as a guide, interpreter of wisdom, and an authority are all unquestioned. He is feared, revered, and even loved. He is addressed as *yeneta* (Master) by his students.

The words “fear” and “master” in Wagaw’s (1990, p. 38) interpretation of the student-teacher relationship in traditional schools should not be considered as suggestive of the use of force. It should be seen in a context where the humility and respect of both teachers and students to each other was the norm that defined the meaning of wisdom and their relationships with each other as they tried to excel in fulfilling those values. As God is the giver of knowledge, to know is to belong to God, to act in accordance with the good characteristics of God.

#### ***3.4.3. Wisdom, and the non-essentiality of the other***

The relationship between wisdom and the conception of good and evil suggests the purpose for which knowledge should be acquired and the ethical values that should

guide the process of its acquisition. The view of wisdom as the pursuit to know the good and to practice it presupposes the existence of good and evil as objects of knowledge. Reflecting some aspect of western dualism could help exemplify the conception of good and evil in the Ethiopian religiocultural tradition. The Ethiopian conception of dualism presupposes two important qualities: the non-essentialism of the other, and the humility of the self. These two concepts are embodied in the idea of *irq*, a form of a priori presupposition on the possibility of reconciliation between good and evil. Western philosophical tradition, on the other hand, absolutises the dichotomy between self and other. In particular, it essentialises the identity of the colonial other. Bhabha's (1994, p. 66) conception of "fixity", which "connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition" illustrates the position of the other. In order for the self to acquire a superior identity and remain in an established civilisation, the other has to always be defined as the embodiment of the self's opposite qualities, and stay outside of the civilisation so established. This can be related to what Harvie Ferguson observed about modernity. He argued, "[m]odernity as a break from the past...gained meaning only in relation to non-modern societies and cultures, so that any understanding of experience in terms of modernity is always liable to provoke a contrary perspective" (Ferguson, 2000, p. 3). The Ethiopian conception of the other presented here, not as a necessary opposite of the west's but as a discourse of its own formation, can be seen as embodying a non-identical conception from the above.

Initially, the Kebra Nagast appears to give opposite qualities for good and evil. On a subsection about "the Kingdom of Adam", the Kebra Nagast mentions the birth of good and evil at the time when Adam was driven out of the Garden. It says,

At that sorrowful moment Cain was born, and when Adam saw that the face of Cain was ill-tempered (or, sullen) and his appearance evil he was sad. And then Abel was born, and when Adam saw that his appearance was good and his face good-tempered he said, "This is my son, the heir of my kingdom" (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 3).

Abel and Cain became the first ‘seeds’ of good and evil. Abel was described as God fearing, without envy, and good-tempered while Cain was a person who did not fear God. He was described as hot-tempered, and envious whose progeny lived “without law, without measure, and without rule” (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 4). Then, out of the matrimonial union between those who believed in God and those who denied him came the offspring of the good and the evil seeds. Here, it is possible to see that good and evil had the same sources. Symbolised by the brotherhood of Abel and Cain, both could stand in parallel occupying the opposite realms of goodness and evil. “Everyone is in either of the two sides, not in both” (Interview, May 29, 2011). This shows that the difference with the western conception of dualism is not on the opposite nature of the qualities of good and evil. However, in Ethiopia, the separation between good and evil was not considered absolute. It is possible that one can move from the side of evil to good through the process of reconciliation, *irq*, or forgiveness, *yiqirta*.

In the Ethiopian traditional conception of dualism, reality is not a combination of irredeemable opposites that never change their position. There is a window for hope: a possibility that evil is redeemable. The cardinal example of this possibility was presented in the hagiography of Kiristos Samra, an Ethiopian woman (she is consecrated as holy) who attempted to reconcile Satan with God. She prayed for several years asking God to forgive the Satan and to end the war between good and evil. Her hagiography states that God actually listened to her prayer and allowed her to go and bring Satan if he wishes to reconcile with God. She went to Sheol and asked Satan to come out with her and make peace with God. However, Satan refused, but instead of him, she took numerous condemned souls out of Sheol to paradise. Then, God gave her the power to redeem numerous other souls from Sheol to heaven, till the end of the world. The story is well known among Ethiopian orthodox believers, and the possibility of condemned souls to be transferred from damnation to heaven is not contrary to the common belief of the population. Its significance here is only to indicate that in the general conception of dualism in Ethiopia, the bad is not unalterable, there is the assumption that with a great deal of effort (prayer or mediation) it is possible to turn the bad into good, or to influence evil to become good.

In the Ethiopian tradition, holy persons are always regarded as mediators between good and evil. In the Miracles of Saint Mary, an evil person, who had killed and eaten seventy lives, gave few drops of water to a leper when he was asked in the name of Saint Mary. The murderer who is commonly known as *belaae sebb*, the cannibal, died and appeared before the throne of God where Saint Mary appeared and casted her shadow in favour of him. Consequently, he was delivered from damnation (Interview, 14 April, 2011). Kaplan (1984, p. 83) noted that “Like the angels, the monastic holy man was recognised as a mediating figure capable of reaching and influencing a distant God”. Here, Kaplan’s reference to the mediating monks as ‘men’ should be considered to include females. Female saints such as Kiristos Samra, Arsema, Maskel Kibra and others are said to have played significant mediatory roles between the holy and the sinful (Interview, 14 April, 2011).

It is interesting to notice the parallel development of political mediation along with the belief in spiritual mediation. Kaplan (1984, p. 83) noted that “with the consolidation of the Solomonic rule [in Ethiopia] there arose in the religious sphere a pattern of lord-mediator-client relations which paralleled those of the political system”. This philosophical and cultural tradition has been reflected in reconciliation ceremonies between a murderer and a victim’s relatives; or in the tradition of pardoning rebels (*shifta*) by traditional leaders. According to a university lecturer, in the Addis Ababa University, the practice of student resistance and protest presupposed a minimum sensitivity and amenability of the opposite side to certain moral precepts (Interview, 12 May, 2012). During the 1993 student protest in Addis Ababa, the students decided to shelter in the Mary Church of *Amist Killo*. The assumption was that the government forces would not take brutal measures in the compound of the church. A student mentioned to me how thousands of students gathered and sat peacefully in the church, and how he felt that the only safe place to be at that time was the church of *Kidane Mihret*, the Covenant of Mercy, which is also at the backyard of the Patriarch of the church. However, the cultural expectation was dashed, and government forces took the advantage to surround the church and forced the students into military trucks and took them to a detention centre outside the capital. As will be shown in later chapters, as the country moved from traditional sources to modern sources of power, or from Kingdom

to Elitdom, the concept of dualism also radically shifted towards antagonistic bifurcation between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’. In this conception, the possibility of *irq*, reconciliation, was hardly possible.

Like Covenant, the conception of wisdom as a gift from God suggests the embodiment of eternal principles in it. Wisdom embodies God’s ethical principles; it serves as a discriminating criterion for truth: it verifies the validity, significance and relevance of knowledge to be considered as good and true. Not all knowledge is considered useful for society. Individuals whether educated or not are considered wise only when they are centred in and act in accordance with the society’s highest ethical principles with humility and compassion. This means that the validity of knowledge is internally determined by the culture of the people concerned. For example, in the Kebra Nagast, knowledge of cross-fertilization practiced by children of Cain was considered wrong: “in the greatness of their filthiness they introduced the seed of the ass into the mare, and the mule came into being, which God had not commanded” (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 4). Those who practiced sorcery and magic were also condemned although tolerated to live peacefully in the community and even played some social roles as healers and reconcilers. There was fear and aversion towards blacksmiths as they were called evil eyed */buda/*; however, they played indispensable roles in the production of farm and household equipment such as ploughshares and knives. Thus, the meaning of wisdom is not the acquisition of any type of knowledge or skill. As the world was believed to inhabit both the forces of good and evil, wisdom is qualified by the fear of God, the practice of compassion and the self-humility of the individual. To be wise is not to exceed in knowledge but to align oneself with the good, that is, with the Covenant.

#### ***3.4.4. Humility of the Self as an attribute of wisdom***

The conception of the self is not solely based on the interest and preservation of the self, but its subjugation to a higher ideal. Humbleness, modesty and respect are important qualities. One should always humble himself/herself before God and others.

[A]ll the arrogant among men walk in [the Devil's] way and they shall be judged with him. And God loveth the lowly-minded, and those who practice humility walk in His way, and they shall rejoice in His kingdom (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 24).

The wise person was considered analogous to a person who has water for the thirsty, food for the hungry, healing to the sick, and apparel to the naked (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 18). This has important implications in setting a standard for the behaviour of leaders and the expectation of their people. The king was expected to be wise. He was expected to manifest kindness to the people, and respect to the laws of God.

The view of the king as a wise “shepherd of his people” (Molvaer, 1980, p. 30) who is kind and caring, enabled him to exercise patronage on any matter that came into his attention. It also required the absolute obedience and submission of the people to his will. This submissive effect that the Kebra Nagast promoted among the population cannot be defended. In practice, many Ethiopian Kings and their dignitaries had subjected the people to a form of exploitation (Tibebu, 1995). However, the conception of wisdom as an essential attribute of being an elect of God, and its meaning as humility and compassion implies a mitigating ground for the absolutism of the King. God is imagined not just as a powerful master but more importantly as a merciful father (Interview, March 20, 2011). Likewise, the king had to rule in the likeness of God to maintain the legitimacy of his superior power. The Kebra Nagast provides “In what way is the king superior if he hath not done good upon the earth to the poor?” (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 99).

The chronicles of several Ethiopian Kings explain their humility as the source of their strength. When the King of Ethiopia received the messenger of Prophet Muhammad, it was stated that “[h]e came down the throne and sat on the ground to show his humbleness and respect for Allah's Apostle, our Master Muhammad” (Ja'far al-Tayyar). The exercise of power was always justified based on a higher ideal. In the chronicle of Emperor Yemrehanna Kiristos, the King was reported to have prayed:

Oh my Lord, how could I reign over your people? I am deficient in intelligence and inferior to all people. Consider carefully whom do you make reign over your people, for you my Lord know the littleness of my heart. Could I ever be in charge of the affairs of the kingdom or could I declare the laws right? (Krawczuk, 1934, p. 11)

The response to his prayer was also written as:

There is no victory in battle for worriers and there is no race for the swift, there is no wealth for plunderers and there won't be food for the learned nor kingdom, nor governance for the wise – [if it is] without my spirit ... Now then I shall make you intelligent and give you wisdom ... I shall enlighten your heart with a torch of wisdom (Krawczuk, 1934, p. 11)

The above quotes underscore humility as an important discourse on power. According to Kaplan (1984, p. 12) the model of the ideal King was a monk. “When [King] Lalibela had assumed the throne, he submitted himself to a fast more severe than that of the monks, because to him the kingship appeared as a monastic life”. Moreover, King Yikuno Amlak “would bow several times praying wearing sack” (Kaplan, 1984, p. 13). King Kaleb, King Susneyous, Motalame, and many other political figures gave up their power becoming monastic hermits. Emperor Zara Yacob's letter to Jerusalem reflected the significance of humility:

My beloved, do not you offer to say, Light descended only upon us, that glorying in yourself be not in vain; since you know that evil attends glorying and blessing humility (quoted in Russell, 1833, p. 226).

What the above analysis shows is that irrespective of the historicity of the great qualities of the kings, humility, justice, and spirituality are widely regarded as political

and social virtues. Traditionally, these virtues are regarded highly and considered as the qualities of educated persons. The common Amharic proverb *yetemare yigdelegne* which literally means “let my death be caused by a learned person” indicates the respect and trust an educated person enjoys in Ethiopian society (Interview, April 22, 2011). The proverb implies that a learned person cannot harm without justice, or he/she is not cruel enough to kill you even if you wanted him/her to kill you. The assumption in favor of the innocence and harmlessness of educated persons is strengthened by the Kebra Nagast (1932, p. 20-24) which provides:

The honouring of wisdom is the honouring of the wise man, and the loving of wisdom is the loving of the wise man. Love the wise man and withdraw not thyself from him, and by the sight of him thou shalt become wise; hearken to the utterance of his mouth, so that thou shalt become like unto him.

The influence of this view is quite visible in traditional schools where greater respect is awarded for teachers. Teachers are called *yeqelem abat* / pen father/, in the way a priest is called *yenefise abat* / soul father/. It is important that the character of the teacher should reflect the lived meaning of humility without which such reverence may not be awarded (Interview, April 13, 2011). For example, candidates who wanted to study *qine* in the school of poetry would travel to the teacher’s home which often would be far away from their own. On their arrival, they may not be readily accepted until their stamina and manner is noted. Once their resilience is checked out often through their interaction with students, the teacher would approach the candidates with a basin of water for foot washing. The ceremony of acceptance to a community of students who have to study one of the highly regarded levels of education, *qine*, starts with the humility of the teacher. The teacher would kneel down in front of the students and wash their feet as a sign of registration in the school. This practical lesson orients the manner and tone of the relationship that would guide schooling for the years to come. Humbled by this act of extreme humility, the students remain vigilant and faithful to their tasks



(Interview, April 13, 2011). Every day, at the end of their class the students bless their teacher with the following metaphorical expression of wisdom:

May God cause thy word to be heard, and make thee to arrive at  
the earth in Debra Libanos and to be evergreen like the cibaha!  
May he broaden thee as the sycamore [Warka] and cause thee to  
shine as the moon! (S. Pankhurst, 1955, p. 522)

The traditional reverence to the educated person brings the correlation between power and knowledge. Although knowledge was considered to be the gift of God, the capacity to be heard and to influence the views and activities of others, or the ability to put it to good use, is related to one's level of learning in the traditional school system. Students at the lower level of their studies had to obey their seniors (Interview, March 21, 2011). However, the seniors had to be wise enough—humble and compassionate—to earn the respect of their juniors. Here, while knowledge augers the widest possibility for the exercise of power over the less knowledgeable ones, the honoring of wisdom as humility limited the manner in which that power could be exercised. In general, the significant influence the Kebra Nagast places among the students of the traditional education system, which will be discussed in the next chapter, was summarized by Kebede (2006, p. 51).

The impregnation of students with the spirit of Kebra Nagast enabled them to see the world from the viewpoint of Ethiopia. In a word, the discourse centred Ethiopia by endowing it with a specific mission, which became the repository of its national identity.

### **3.5. CONCLUSION**

By creating the imagination of Ethiopia as the centre of the world, the Ark of the Covenant gave a supreme validating power to Ethiopia's national interests. This chapter shows how this belief helped Ethiopia to exist as a nation. It argued that the Kebra Nagast as an ideology of kingdom in Ethiopia embodied political and social values that

created vertical and horizontal relationships in the country. The concept of covenant created the imagination of a chosen nation ruled by the ideal king who governs in the moral likeness of God. The king was considered superior and the nation was regarded eternal. Socially, the Kebra Nagast provided values that guided the ethical basis of right conduct. The conception of knowledge as a gift from God, and wisdom as a discriminating criterion between good and evil suggest the significance of ethics for knowledge. In the Kebra Nagast, wisdom was considered as the fear of God and the practice of compassion, implying vertical and horizontal connectedness. Vertically, wisdom connects the person with the highest ideal; horizontally it relates the person to others through compassion and humility. In this regard, the ideal self is not an independent, self-centred and self-motivated individual. It is instead a being with a vertical connection with covenant, and a horizontal connection with society. Wisdom as the trainer of the senses helps the person achieve, maintain and expand his/her relational identities. The concept of *irq* is one way of expanding this connectedness. By drawing good and evil on opposite but non-fixed planes, the concept of *irq* emphasises the various possibilities through which evil could be accepted or reconciled with the good than abandoned or destroyed.

The chapter contests the thesis of lack or absence that western and African scholarship assumed about African thought (Mudimbe, 1988), and that the development of elite ideology is justified upon (Chapter Six). The existence of Ethiopia with “historical continuity and political independence, written language, and written philosophy” (Sumner, 2005, p. 15) disproves the Hegelian assertion that Africa “is not a historical part of the world” (Hegel, 1856, p. 93). It also offers an indigenous insight to the conjecture that “the great danger that threatens Africa is the absence of ideology” (Fanon, 1967, p. 186). The above thesis of the absence of indigenous political thought in Africa has been blamed on colonialism. However, as will be demonstrated in the forthcoming chapters, Ethiopia, being the only uncolonised African country has fallen under the same thesis of primitivism and absence. The Kebra Nagast as one source of national ideology under this chapter, and the traditional intellectual legacy of the country as presented in the next chapter show that the dismissal of tradition and the imitation of

western systems was motivated by the power interest of political leaders and not by the requirement of modernization.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE INTELLECTUAL LEGACY OF THE COUNTRY**

#### **4.1. INTRODUCTION**

A reflective assessment of Ethiopia's intellectual legacy reveals an internalised interpretative paradigm that helps to evaluate the relevance and significance of knowledge that was put in the public domain. Ethiopia's intellectual legacy developed under the purview of the key principles of the Kebra Nagast that include covenant and wisdom. These key principles provided a sense of direction and purpose to education, and enabled Ethiopian scholars to interpret rather than imitate knowledge from international sources. The principles were ingrained in the daily lessons of the students of the traditional school system, and in the minds of traditional scholars who translated various books from Greek, Hebraic, and Arabic sources. This chapter will exemplify the interpretative mindset the Ethiopian education system upheld among its students by examining the process of traditional schooling, traditional literature and philosophy, and the role of traditional scholars based on dialogical, observational, and archival data. The chapter will show the existence of ethiocentric intellectual legacy that furnished an interpretative paradigm which was later supplanted by the guest models that were imitated from the West.

#### **4.2. TRADITIONAL EDUCATION, TRADITIONAL SCHOLARS AND THE CHURCH**

Traditional education in Ethiopia has had a school system that could be regarded as the intellectual core of Ethiopians' self-understanding and self-knowledge (Isaac, 1971). The traditional schools became centres of learning for sixteen centuries until they were progressively supplanted by "modern" schools since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, the schools are still important especially in the lives of the rural Christian majority. Aklilu Habte (2010) considered that the number of Ethiopian traditional schools was not known but modest estimates suggest that there are about 30,000 to

35,000 traditional schools still existing in the country. It was also estimated that 25 per cent of the Ethiopian male population are ecclesiastics (Tamene, 1998, p. 96). These estimates are consistent with my observation in the town of Lalibela and the surrounding areas where traditional scholars and their students are active participants in social and cultural life. Both traditional schooling and traditional scholars are essential parts of the traditional education system. They uphold nationalistic perspectives, play spiritual and secular roles, and promote a cultural life through intellectual activities that are centred on the beliefs and philosophies of Orthodox Church tradition.

The most important contribution of the traditional education system is the consolidation of a social, political, and cultural centre in the country. The church has been the major agent in this process. Its traditional school system produced scholars who played pivotal roles in the lives of their society by acting as spiritual fathers, exorcists, preachers, hymnists, healers, mediators, councillors, judges etc. Based on the domain of their function, one can observe two groups of scholars in the traditional education system. The first group are graduates of the School of Mass, *Kidassie Bet*, and the School of Hymn, *Zema Bet*, whose function concentrated mainly within the confines of the Orthodox Church, giving religious services to believers. The second group are graduates of the School of Poetry, *Qine Bet* and the School of Books, *Metsehaf Bet*. These scholars are commonly known as *Dabtaras*, (cantors) and their functions address religious and secular life transcending religious, ethnic and other divides that existed in the country. Their training enabled them to develop a national perspective that transcended religious and ethnic differences.

According to Shelemay (1992), the multifaceted role of *dabtaras* as healers, magicians and councillors created a deep interaction among several belief systems in Ethiopia. The *dabtaras* used “words-of-power” derived from the three most important religions of the country, namely, Christianity, Islam and Judaism to produce their books and scrolls, called *kitab*s. In addition to Geez, Hebraic, and Greek names, “[t]he Arab names of God, Allah, and ‘Muhammad’ and ‘Nabi’ (prophet), and ‘Rasul’ (messenger) were treated as magical names and are often found in the amulets, and also transcripts of Greek forms of the names and titles of Christ” (Budge, 1928, p. 598). The *dabtaras* still use these names in their *kitab*s for spiritual healing (Interview, March 13, 2011). In a

country where the majority of Ethiopians (80%) live in remote rural villages and hamlets without access to public services, the role of traditional scholars is still of paramount importance. In these villages, as is visible in the surroundings of Lalibela, secular life is not different from religious life, and this intermix is sustained through the teaching of traditional scholars whose function concentrated around the provision of secular and religious services near the church. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church could be regarded as the centre of social and cultural life, and the scholars of the church as the coordinators of that life.

Often built with a circular architecture, at the most exalted place in the village or town, the church represents the central point with which the surrounding life is deemed connected (Interview, May 21, 2012). It embodies the highest moral authority, and is a sacred ground where individuals could not step their feet inside without removing their shoes. Activities in the house and on the field are dictated by the regulations of the church. Social customs and individual behaviour such as marriage, burial, farming, eating, singing etc. are regulated by established religious customs that could be traced to the daily teaching of the church. Most national holydays such as the founding of the True Cross (*Meskel*), Christmas (*Lidet*), Epiphany (*Timket*), Good Friday (*Siklet*), Easter (*Tinsae*), are attributes of the church to the national holydays of the country. By addressing the country as a single entity, by training its scholars with a perspective that perceived the land as a covenant nation, and by promoting wisdom – adherence to higher values of spiritualism, humility, service and honour, the church imparted a national consciousness among the large section of the Ethiopian population. It produced scholars whose knowledge and vocation is deeply grounded in the cultural life of the people. Thus, the development of a national culture in Ethiopia is closely associated with the intellectual contribution of the Ethiopian Orthodox church. As Isaac (1971, p. 10) argued, “[a]s well as being the institution through which religious continuity was maintained, the Ethiopian church school served as the main instrument for the development and propagation of a national culture, and for the creation of a national literature”.

He further emphasised the role of the schools in maintaining the strong association or indivisibility between the culture of the people and religion.

The purpose and content of education are religious, but it must be noted that since in Ethiopia religion and life are intricately tied together, the learned man is not required to be a priest. Nor can the society function in the traditional sense without the enlightenment and guidance of the men of learning – all students of religion (Isaac, 1971, p. 14).

For Isaac, it is “alienation from the church on the part of the many educated people” that “retarded [Ethiopia’s] fuller participation in modern education” (Isaac, 1971, p. 15). Because traditional scholars understand the philosophy, language, literature, history, and tradition of the people better than those educated based on the European model of education, until now the former have influenced the lives of the people more deeply and directly than the latter. Consequently, “university trained people to a certain extent lag behind the traditional scribes in producing substantial works of literature and scholarship” (Isaac, 1971, p. 15). Isaac (1971, pp. 1-16) stressed the inclusion of traditional knowledge, especially, qine, in the modern Ethiopian system of education without which “Ethiopian self-understanding and national consciousness” could not be maintained. So far, I have stressed the role and contribution of traditional scholars, especially dabtaras, as promoters of national consciousness among diverse groups in the country, and the role of the Orthodox Church as a social and cultural centre. The process through which these scholars were trained shows the existence of a national intellectual legacy that developed and passed from generation to generation for several centuries.

#### **4.3. EDUCATION IN THE TRADITIONAL SCHOOL SYSTEM**

The Ethiopian traditional education system survived for several centuries up to the present. The level of studies in the traditional school system in Ethiopia may be divided into two major parts: the lower and the higher level of study, or ordinary and high level studies (Wodajo, 1959). The lower or ordinary level of study comprises the House of Reading (*nibab bet*), and the House of Mass (*kidassie bet*). The higher or

advanced level of study includes the House of Hymn (*zema bet*), the House of Poetry (*qine bet*), and the House of Books (*metsehaf bet*). Each level has defined purposes that equip students with skills and concepts to help them develop literary and social skills, understand and interpret knowledge, and assume defined roles in their communities (Interview, March 10, 2011). The education system has established curriculum, text books, specialised teachers and a structure of elementary and higher level studies “designed to produce religious and secular leaders” (Mazrui & Wagaw, 1985, p. 8). A complete study in the entire education system could take about twenty-eight years (Wagaw, 1990, p. 31). A person who graduated from all schools would gain the rare title “*arat ayina*”, which literarily means the “Four Eyed”. The title suggests the depth of intellect the learned person acquires to view the past as well as the future. In addition to literary, linguistic and liturgical skills, students internalise key principles that help them understand their role and guide their action.

All students, except those in the house of reading, view their intellectual journey as a spiritual experience, or destiny. A typical response from one *dabtara* summarizes the five principles that are emphasised in this section:

When I realised that I was *chosen* by the will of God to serve Him as a preacher, I made a solemn *covenant* to follow my calling to the end. Then, I wandered in various places to learn God’s word and to become *wise*. Now, I feel like I am a plant that gives fruit every season. Like a tree whose leaves never wither, I am *planted* in the House of God to *serve* His people. May glory and thankfulness be to Him forever and ever, Amen! (Interview, March 12, 2011)

Choiceness, covenant, wisdom, centeredness (to be “planted”), and service represent the key qualities or fruits a learned person should yield to the people after long years of education. As shown in the previous chapter, the coming of the Ark of the Covenant was an expression of divine choice to make Ethiopia the centre of the world (Chapter Three). Choice expresses the will of God that transcends human volition. In



the act of choosing, the individual is an object, not a subject. It is God who chooses the destiny of the individual. The common Amharic proverb, “*ke’enchet merito le’tabot, kesewu merito leshumet*” which means “as a tree is chosen from trees for *tabot* (to make a replica of the Ark of the Covenant), a man is chosen from men for an office” illustrates this belief.

Choice or God’s Will may be inferred from a sign such as a dream or from the fulfilment of a wish, or from the personal disposition of the individual towards something good (Interview, May 21, 2011). It is believed that the individual would be naturally inclined towards a certain destiny, *enjera*, and one can understand his/her destiny by looking at the various skills and interests he/she has (Interview, April 19, 2011). The emphasis on the role of God in one’s destiny (*edil*) has been criticised as it serves the acceptance of oppressive power as destiny (refer). As will be shown later, this perspective is upheld among students who view God as the author of everything that occurs in their lives. However, church scholars argue that God’s choice cannot be inferred from circumstances that do not reflect His qualities (Interview, March 15, 2012). The search for wisdom through knowledge and practice shows the role the individual should play to discover the real destiny that reflects the good choices of the creator.

This implies that any choice could be taken seriously as a destiny chosen by God if it is within the ethical bounds of the society. The person who believed or accepted the choice makes *covenant*, a solemn promise, to follow his/her calling. Referring to the harsh student-life such as the need to sustain oneself at school by begging for food in the village, one student remembered, “without the view of one’s calling as a Covenant between the Almighty and oneself, the ordeal of going through extreme poverty for the sake of education is unthinkable” (Interview, March 12, 2011). What is learned in this process is *wisdom*. As shown in the previous chapter, to be wise is to gain something in order to renounce it; to accumulate in order to distribute; to have in order to give and serve. Thus, the learned man manifests a deeper sense of humility known in Geez as ‘*atihitote-ries*’, which means the humility of the self (Interview, March 15, 2011). During the interview, a church scholar emphasised that “A learned man is like a tree that never stops yielding fruit. His life is *centred* at the intersection of vertical and horizontal

axis of service: vertically reverence to God, and horizontally service to God's creation" (Interview, May 22, 2011). The metaphor of the tree expresses the need to be centred on something more important than oneself, to have roots in society. Brief analysis of each of the schools of the traditional education system reveals the above key axiological imperatives of the interpretative legacy the system upheld in the country.

#### **4.4. ORDINARY LEVEL OF STUDY IN THE TRADITIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM**

##### **4.4.1. *Nibab Bet***

The first level of study in the traditional education system is the nibab bet, which could be translated as the House of Reading. It focuses on the development of skills that enables the student to read and understand key social and religious concepts. In addition to reading, the student learns simple writing with arithmetic (S. Pankhurst, 1955). To graduate from this level of study, the student has to practice "correct reading of ge'ez" through six successive stages. Here, reading skill is not equated with the capacity to identify the words in a text. "It involves knowledge of the right tone and letter that should be used in a particular text" (Interview, May 19, 2011). The Geez alphabet has thirty letters each with seven variations. Depending on the context used, words or letters that sound the same could have varying meanings or characters.

Learning the right reading at the nibab bet takes place in four successive levels. First is *fidel gebeta*, which is simple counting of the 270 letters from right to left, then from top to bottom, with slow and medium rhythmic dictation followed by fast counting in the same fashion. The student also learns the Ethiopian numerals. Once tested and passed this stage, the student will start the next stage of counting, which is called *a-bu-gi-da*. At this stage, the alphabets are all mixed up making it difficult for the student to identify them by their positions in the *fidel gebeta*. The teachers believe that the mixing up of the alphabet in the *a-bu-gi-da* helps to reduce the effect of rote learning (Interview, May 19, 2011) with which the nibab bet is often criticized for (Wodajo, 1959). Then, a student who could correctly identify the letters passes *a-bu-gi-da*, and is provided with a text from the Epistle of St. John to start the third level of reading.

Reading at the third stage comprises four modes of reading. These are reading with *kutir* (counting each letter in each word), *ge'ez or netela nibab* (reading with slow rhythmic chanting of each word), *urd nibab* (reading with faster rhythmic chanting of each phrase), followed by *nibab* (fast and loud reading). The fourth and fifth stages of the *nibab bet* are devoted to strengthening the reading abilities of the student by providing him/her with more texts from the Acts of the Apostles, and from the Gospels. The six and last stage is the practice of reading using the Book of Psalms and other biblical songs. The student reads the Psalm with the three sounds called *tire-nibab*, *urd*, and *nibab*, paying attention to sounds that need stress intonation, rhythm, and speed. The 150 chapters of the Psalm are divided into each of the seven days. Once the student is able to read the Psalm together with the Songs of Solomon and the Songs of other Prophets in the Bible with a fast and loud voice, he or she would graduate from the *nibab bet*. The time required to complete studies at *nibab bet* depends on the ability of the student to learn fast. But, the average student takes one year to read fluently (Interview, May 19, 2011). Graduation ceremonies vary from place to place. Often, the ceremony includes the invitation of the teacher to the home of the student, reward given to the teacher by the parents, and the preparation of feasts and invitation of neighbours (Interview, May 19, 2011).

The second goal of the *nibab bet* is socialisation. At the school, stories, proverbs, jokes, manner of sitting, speaking, walking, the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament, and the Six Commandments of the New Testament are repeatedly explained to the students in plenary sessions. Respect to elders, to parents, and to anybody older in age is always emphasised. Although the *Kebra Nagast* is not used as a textbook, the story of the Queen of Sheba, and the coming of the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia, is among the stories told to the students (Interview, May 23, 2011). At this stage, the student starts to become dimly familiar with the various spiritual and material concepts made available to him/her. For example, through the study of the Mystery of Creation or *Miestre Fitret*, students start to understand the creationist concept of the origin of life. They also study the 'five pillars of the church' which include the Mystery of Trinity, Mystery of Incarnation, Mystery of Baptism, Mystery of Holy Communion, and Mystery of Resurrection (Interview, May 23, 2011). The teaching of these concepts

takes place in the form of questions and answers. An example of the teaching on the Mystery of Trinity takes place in a question and answer method as follows:

Question: Who created you?

Answer: *Silasee*, /the trinity/

Question: How many are Selassie?

Answer: One and three

Question: What makes them one, and what makes them three?

Answer: They are three in name, in task, and in person. They are one in divinity, in power, in glory, and in similar things of this sort they are one.

The learning process allows both the student and the teacher as questioner and respondent to participate in speaking. However, the ideas spoken are not theirs. They have to memorise each of the questions with their corresponding answers word for word. The practice of memorization is important for the student as study by memorization is the dominant mode of learning in the traditional school system. The method has been criticised as a form of ‘rote’ learning. According to Wodajo (1959, p. 25), “there is hardly any place for understanding or for the cultivation of a creative imaginative mind”. Moreover, most texts used to practice reading are in Geez, the old Ethiopian language used only in the churches. Students in the *nibab bet* hardly understood the significance of the concepts. They simply aim at impressing their teacher, their parents, and other audiences by reading the geez scriptures fast and without committing any mistakes. The social incentive of appreciating good reading as “*yibel*” by church scholars at a church festival is a great source of pride for a graduate of the *nibab bet*.

Despite the criticisms of this form of learning, the traditional school teachers consider rote memory as essential instrument for the training of the mind. A traditional school teacher thinks the act of teaching through memorization is similar to the act of farming.

The farmer ploughs the land to bury the raw seed under the soil.

The seed eventually dies in the soil and grows up as a plant after it elapsed a certain period of time. Likewise, rote learning is

similar to sowing the raw seed of knowledge in the mind of the student to allow it to grow at the later stages of his/her education (Interview, May 23, 2011).

The argument of the traditional school is that rote learning at the earliest age will plant the most essential beliefs and values of society in the mind of the student. These values and beliefs do not require critical reflection (Interview, May 21, 2011). They need to be accepted as they are given to humans by divine revelation, not through human wit. Thus, they are destined to the realm of the heart (*lib*), not to the mind (*ayimiro*). That is to say that they should be believed, not reasoned or doubted. Furthermore, the mind needs an initial substance to start to exercise critical reflection on. Whether rejected or accepted, what is provided to it at the earliest stage serves as a starting point of intellectual inquiry, and the Ethiopian traditional school system should orient the direction of that inquiry at the earliest possible age (Interview, March 15, 2011). The study of the dogmas and values helps students to acquire Ethiopia's religious and cultural identities to become the starting point of their future intellectual growth.

In summary, the House of Reading teaches key skills, values and dispositions to the student. The student acquires the skill of reading Geez texts and the Ethiopian writing system which is the authentic and indigenous invention of ancient Ethiopian scholars (Bekerie, 1997). He/she also learns metaphysical concepts that define the meaning of existence and provide the intellectual framework and context for thinking. The process of learning also helps to develop cooperative and integrative social dispositions. Students who complete reading will have the option either to go to the public school or to continue in the subsequent level of studies within the traditional school system. Several teachers claim that students who attended the reading school become more successful when they join the public school (Interview, March 12, 2011). Most of them passed two semester classes in one semester, and were able to socially integrate well with others. Students who prefer to advance their intellectual pursuit within the traditional education system continue to the next level of study in the traditional school system, which is the *Kidassie Bet*.

#### 4.4.2. *Kidassie Bet*

The second level of study in the traditional school is the study of liturgy in the House of the Holy Mass. This is a speciality reserved primarily for the training of priests and deacons. The training in the function of deacons is called *gibre dikuna*, and that of priests is called *gibre kissina*. According to a High Priest at Lalibela, Ethiopian church tradition provides that *Kidassie* came from the geez verb “*kedesse*” which means *amesegene* or “to become thankful” (Interview, March 19, 2011). There are twenty Anaphors used during the holy mass of *Kidasse*. Most of these Anaphors were produced by Ethiopian Monks who dedicated them, for want of humility and enhanced acceptance of their work, to the names of saints. Priests and deacons study the text and hymns for the Mass and other services. The reverence to *Kidasse* is so important that all able-bodied persons around the church remain standing from the beginning to the end. This normally takes from 2 to 3 hours. The High Priest noted that,

Once the *kidasse* is started, heavenly angels would descend and fall on the unoccupied floor of the church, in front of the Ark of the Covenant. People who enter or move inside the church at that time risk bringing upon themselves *meqsefit*, a punishment for contempt as they could be stepping on the angels that fall in front of the *tabot* (Interview, March 19, 2011).

The *tabot* is the replica of the Ark of the Covenant which is placed at the centre or the *sanctum sanctorum* of the church. By studying the various Anaphors and related hymns, students of *Kidasse Bet* prepare themselves to render regular spiritual services to the public by singing and performing rituals in front of the *tabot*. Graduation from this school will lead to eligibility for ordinance as a priest or a deacon. The authority of the priests is believed to be equivalent to the authority of the twelve disciples of Jesus in the Bible (Interview, March 19, 2011). The High Priest noted that, “Priests are like shepherds; they hold the key to open the gates of heaven”. Deacons are generally assistants for the priests. They read the holy manuscripts of the church to the public during the Holy Mass, and assist in the preparation of the Eucharist. Priests function as confessors, they are called *nefis abat* (soul father).

Every Orthodox household in Ethiopia is expected to have one *nefis abat* (soul father). The *nefis abat* would regularly visit the home of his soul children, help them resolve issues within the family, remind them of monthly and annual observations of fasting, and impose penances for confessions. A priest leads regular prayers and any person meeting him on the road would bow while approaching to kiss the cross in the priest's hand saying '*yiftugne abate*' which means "set me free my father". The priest would respond '*em'maesere hatiyat Egziabher yifta*' which literally means "may God set you free from the bondage of sin". This and similar functions of the priest and deacon are pivotal in the cultural life of the people of Lalibela, and other parts of the country in Ethiopia.

With the replica of the *tabot* at its most inner centre, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is called *bete kirstian*, which literally means "the House of Christians". Only priests are allowed to touch or carry the *tabot*. According to Gebre Giyoris (1997, p.78) *tabot* means medicine, it also is a holy vessel that carried the medicine that healed the world. It is also regarded as *medagna*, a means of salvation, a source of divine providence. In the *kidasse*, the Mother of Jesus, the Ark of Noah, and the Tablets of Moses are frequently analogised. Mary is like 'the Ark of Noah through which he [Noah] was saved from the evil's destruction' (Daoud & Wolde-Kirkos, 1959, p. 76). The following song in the *Kidasse* also reflects the same perspective:

Mother of martyrs!  
A pure palace, beauteous and fair!  
Ark which contained the law,  
Fair in raiment of gold, clad with divers colours (Rodwell, 1864,  
pp. 89-90).

A High Priest in Lalibela believes that as Noah was protected from the destruction of the world by his Ark, likewise, Ethiopia is protected by the Ark of the Covenant (Interview, April 26, 2012). In the Kebra Nagast the Virgin Mary, as a symbol of the salvation of the world, is symbolised by a Pearl. It can be argued that the Pearl

implaces salvation in the human body as it provides, “Those of you who have carried the pearl will be saved” (Isaac, 2013, p. 245).

The previous chapter highlighted that the Kebra Nagast was the most important source of national ideology as it presents the existence of the Ark of the Covenant as the proof of Ethiopia’s messianic destiny. Here, it can be observed that it is the church and its schools that made this conception part of the living tradition of the people, and the occasion of *kidasse* is the most sacred expression of that belief. The school of *kidasse* is not a highly sophisticated study as it is greatly dedicated towards learning the rituals of the church.

Another important concept that can be drawn from the teaching of the traditional school is the emphasis it gives to the significance of place. As provided in the previous chapter, the Kebra Nagast presented the Ark of the Covenant as the mercy seat that God used to emplace himself in order to create the world. Likewise, Jesus’s mother Mary, like the Ark of the Covenant, carried the word in her womb to become His mercy seat for the salvation of the world. The Ark of Noah can also be regarded as a place that protected those sheltered in it from the destruction outside. This teaching expands further in the higher level of study where the training of the *dabtaras*– the Ethiopian cantors who are referred to as “the learned Doctors of the church” – is one of its major contributions (S. Pankhurst, 1955, p. 242).

#### **4.5. HIGHER LEVEL STUDY IN THE TRADITIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM**

Higher level of study in the traditional education system in Ethiopia comprises the study of liturgical chant and movement, the study of the art of composing poetry using highly regarded stories and events, and the study of commentaries on various books of religion, law, and time. These three major areas of study are provided under the schools the Zema Bet, Qine Bet, and Metsehaf Bet.



#### 4.5.1. *Zema Bet*

*Zema* simply means hymn or song. *Zema Bet* is the House of liturgical chant with the following sub-specialities.

- The study of *Deggwua* ( antiphonal hymns for the whole year)
- *Tsome Degwua* ( antiphonal songs for Lent)
- *Zimmare and Mawaset* ( hymns in honour of the Eucharist and another antiphony)
- *Aquaquam* (the study of dance with the right use of the prayer stick, sistrum and drum.

In addition to the above sub-specialities, *Kidassie* and *Se'a'ta't* (Holy Mass and Horologium) are regarded as *Zema* studies (Interview, Sept 18, 2011). The *Zema Bet* is the outcome of the development of hymns with a musical writing system that went down through generations of church scholars starting from the time of the great Ethiopian composer Yared in the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D up to the time of Giorgis Zegascha in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. There are two important aspects that link the training in the *Zema Bet* with the interpretative perspective on knowledge in traditional education in Ethiopia. The themes of the songs studied in the *Zema Bet* reflect the belief in the Ark of the Covenant and its symbolic meanings. Second, the seasonal arrangements of the songs reflect the cultural and geographical features of the country. This makes the study of *Zema* relevant to the circumstance of life in the country.

Sound, movement, dance, and percussion are the four important study themes of the *Zema Bet*. For example, *Tsoma Deggwa*, the antiphony for lent, is one of the most admired studies in the *Zema* School. The songs during this long fasting and prayer season are sung with the three major melodies: *ge'ez*, *ezil* and *araray*. The instruments used to sing the songs include the sistrum, the drum and the prayer staff, which are partly related to the Old Testament tradition. *Deggwua* is both a field of study and a text book for the *Zema Bet*. The musical signs written on top of the words in the *deggwua* book have names such as *merged*, *Nius-merged*, *Abiye-Tsefat* and *Tsefat*. When studied, the songs can be sung with the correct rhythm, melody and harmony (Interview, May 16, 2011). The composer of the songs, Yared, was born in A.D, 505 in Axum. He started his career as a deacon, and then became a priest and a treasurer (*gebez*). According to Ethiopian tradition, it is believed that Yared was led to Heaven by three birds to hear the

heavenly songs of angels, and seraphim and cherubim (Gebre Giyorgis, 1997 ). It is believed that he also had obtained inspiration from listening to nature, from the sound of birds, wild beasts and other natural sounds. Inspired by what he saw, he arranged and composed hymns for each season of the year, for summer and winter, and spring and autumn, for festivals and Sabbaths, and for the days of the angels, the prophets, the martyrs and the righteous. His songs were later developed by other Ethiopian hymnists such as, Yohannis of Gebla in Wollo and Tewanei of Deq Istifa in Gojam. Additional hymns were later contributed by the Shoan scholar Aba Giorgis Zegasicha, who had literary and composition skills that were parallel to that of Yared's. The tradition of improving the system continued with the expansion of the musical shorthand from two during Yared to ten (Gebre Giyorgis, 1997 p. xviii).

The content of the songs of Yared reflect the significance of Covenant, as symbolised by the Ark and the Virgin Mary. Yared was serving as a treasurer at the Zion Church in Axum where the original Ark of the Covenant was believed to have been kept. Silvia Pankhurst (1955, p. 239) observed that Yared “composed a cycle of songs in honour of the ancient church of St. Mary of Zion at Aksum”. In his songs, he made several allusions to the Virgin Mary who is symbolised by the Ark of the Covenant. The typical Judo-Christian tradition that involves the Ark of the Covenant and the Virgin Mary as the two Zions that embodied divine providence with special favour and protection to the people of Ethiopia is an important theme of the songs. For example, the following hymn for June 6<sup>th</sup>, or *Sene* 12<sup>th</sup> according to Ethiopian Calendar, the Ark of the Covenant that carried the Laws of God was symbolised with the Virgin Mary who carried in her womb the baby Jesus. The poem, and its translation by Lee Ralph (2011, p. 225) goes:

መአዛ አፍሃ ከመኮል፣ከመ ቅርፍተ ርማን፤  
አስተማሰልክዋ፣ሰረገላተ አሚናዲብ።  
ከመ ማህፈደ ዳዊት ከሳዳ፤  
ወፅላታኒ ዘኦሪት፣ስብሃት የዓውዳ።

Her mouth is like apple; like the skin of a pomegranate  
I compare her to the chariot of Aminadab

Her neck is like the Tower of David  
Her tables [are] of the law  
Glory surrounds her.

The study of the *deggwua* helps the preservation of the notion of a covenant nation through uninterrupted reverence to the Ark of the Covenant, and the Virgin Mary, as a Christian salvation symbols that embodied God's protection for Ethiopia. It is shown earlier that it is a mandatory requirement for every Ethiopian Orthodox Church to possess a replica of the Ark of the Covenant - the *tabot*. Placed at the centre of the Holy of Holies where no one except priests and the king are allowed to enter, all church services are centred around the *tabot* as the most sacred object in the Ethiopian Orthodox faith. The *Debtaras*, which include graduates of the *Zema Bet*, sing and dance in front of it; the priests prepare the Eucharist on it; and, people swear to the truthfulness of their testimony by it. A person who gives his/her word in the name of the *tabot* vouches for its truthfulness. During celebrations the *tabot* is carried by chosen priests. The scholars of *Zema Bet* along with the people accompany it with songs and dances. The colourful expression of honouring the *tabot* can best be observed during epiphany, *timket*, when the singing and the dancing around the *tabot* is observed day and night. During a sermon, a preacher in Lalibela once noted that the two hands of Ethiopia that are stretched out to God as provided in Psalm 68, Verse 31, are the Ark of the Covenant and the Virgin Mary. This interpretation shows how all ideas are used to affirm the notion of a covenant nation as provided in the previous chapter. The preacher also noted that the rigorous melodious songs of the *Zema Bet* are the sacred offering the nation presents every day before the throne of the Trinity (Interview, March 19, 2011)

The *Deggwua* songs are tailored to change with the weather season of Ethiopia, and with the celebration of festivals and holydays. The *deggwua* is divided into three major seasonal parts. The first is *Yohannis*, which comprises the collection of songs appropriate for the period between September or *meskerem*, which is the beginning of Ethiopia's New Year, and the end of November or *Tahisas*. These songs start with the story of John the Disciple, and continue to the New Testament teachings. There are 3572 songs in this section. The second part is called *astemihiro*. These are songs that focus on

the teachings of Jesus. They are prepared for the period between December or *Tahisas*, and March or *Megabit*. There are 3474 songs in this section. The third is called *Fasika*, which means Ester, designed for the period between April or *Miaziya*, and September or Meskerem. These are a collection of 3462 songs.

The songs resonate with the change in the weather system, with the custom and tradition of the people. They suggest the integration of education with cultural life and natural circumstances. A full mastery of the entire hymns in the Zema Bet may need up to 12 years of intensive training (S. Pankhurst, 1955). I have observed that the ensemble and dance *Zema* students and graduates present in front of the Ark of the covenant is often performed at best with twenty four *dabtaras*, to represent the twenty four heavenly priests that are believed to have been singing in front of God's throne in heaven. Twelve *dabtaras* stand on the left led by *gira geta* (leader of the left), and another twelve on the right led by *kegn geta* (leader of the right). The *merie geta* is the master of the choir. A typical song is performed in four modes of chant and dance. The first is the *kum zema*, a form of hymn sung without the use of instruments. The second is *zimamee*, a form of hymn with the swinging of the prayer-stuff and the body. Third is the *meregid*, a form of singing with more rapid movements, and with a special use of all the three instruments, i.e., the sistrum, the drum, and the staff. *Meregid* has subdivisions from one to three levels, depending on the speed of the hymn and the accompanying use of instruments and types of movements. The fourth is *chebchebo* or *tsehifi'at*, which is the most popular song more liked by youth and ordinary people who participate in the dance with handclapping and the happy chant of *elilita*. *Zema bet* students attend the above services as they need to observe, practice and sing with other *dabtaras*.

The school of the *Zema Bet* has developed through centres of excellence that are established by famous teachers at various regions in the country. The teachers do not have land or a separate building, or income for their work. Students from all over the country travel to the private homes of these teachers and make their own small hut around the house of the teacher. "Student life is very harsh. The students must find their own food by begging in the village or doing manual labour, and study day and night without exercise books, or pens and pencils. They have to remember everything by heart" (Interview, May 21, 2011). Tesfamariyam, a *dabtara* from Lalibela recounted his

memory of hunger and disease in his struggle to learn the *Deggwua*. Leaving his parents at his tender age, and suffering from diseases such as scabies, the only means of survival he had was the name *Kidane Mihret* which means Covenant of Mercy. He had to beg for food using this name in the village where he was repeatedly bitten by dogs. Tibebu (1995, p. 100) recognised the struggle between dogs and traditional school students which are also known as “*qolo temari*”:

It is astonishing how developed the sense of dogs are when it comes to identifying *qolo temari*. A calm dog lying down on the ground and letting people pass by suddenly bursts off with anger the moment a *qolo temari* abounds the corner.

At the end of their training, Deggwa students are expected to travel to the few centres of excellence where the most famous scholars reside. In order to verify their knowledge and receive certification, *Zema* students are expected to write their own copy of the entire Deggwa book using ink and animal skin. At the ceremony a deggwua graduate is awarded the name “*meri-geta*”, master of choir, lead scholar, or teacher.

The complete neglect of the traditional school system on the part of the post 1974 governments has led to the decline of the *Zema Bet* and other schools of the traditional education system. Wodajo lamented about this decline even before the beginning of the Marxist-Leninist era in 1974 saying, “It is a source of sorrow to see the decline of the ‘Zema Bet’ without any worthwhile substitute in the government schools” (Wodajo, 1959, p. 26). While the *Zema Bet* is known for spiritual melody and dance, another school called the *qine bet* is famous for the study of logical reasoning, critical thinking, and the composition of poetry.

#### **4.5.2. *Qine Bet***

The *Qine Bet* involves the learning of the Geez language and the composition of poetry. The student who studies *qine* require a thorough knowledge of the Geez language, a fine understanding of the history of the country, a critical understanding of the Bible and other historical and religious texts (Wagaw, 1990). Although poetry is the

main medium through which students' present the core message of their idea, the *qine bet* has many more attributes than writing poems. First, it involves the study of the ge'ez language. A student who joins *qine bet* should come with a good familiarity with ge'ez. In the *qine bet* he further studies the language to the level of using it to express complex concepts using rhyming poems that could be turned into songs. This is important because a *qine* poem should "be rich in content, revealing a deep knowledge of Bible, of Ethiopian history and of the stories and legends which have gathered during the centuries around the great personalities and events of religious and national tradition" (S. Pankhurst, 1955, p. 245). Secondly, the student needs a good knowledge of the psychological, social and cultural features of the people, their emotional appeals, moral precepts, and aspirations. *Bale qine*, someone who possesses *qine*, or can create one, is a person deeply rooted in the cultural life of the people. He can understand the challenges of the people and translate them into timeless songs. The following *qine* poem was presented in October 12 at the celebration of the Archangel Michael, and it expresses a political message regarding the accumulation of significant wealth by the greedy few at the expense of the death of the majority poor.

Michael you sorrowed for the hungry full forty years,  
And, in obedience, you dug Moses' secret grave;  
But the wealthy rejoices when he hears tidings of famine,  
And, he digs a grave for his gold, while the body of his fellow  
man lies outside. (S. Pankhurst, 1955, p. 258)

The training in the art of poetry in *Qine Bet* illustrates the interpretative spirit the Ethiopian education system embodied. What a student has to put in his *Qine* is boundless. In fact, what is admired is his ability to trigger new insights, to elicit a vast array of imagination in order to signify an important point from diverse perspectives. During his training, what is provided before the student is the wide, deep context of religious and cultural knowledge that feeds into his imagination to invent melodious pun and to practice the art of poetry making. The invented poem, to bear credibility and win admiration, should be pregnant with the voice of the voiceless (Interview, May 16,

2011). With a clever use of irony, sarcasm, or satire it should comment against injustice, or express the moral precept of the people. For example, *Asare negus* is a type of *qine* poem presented in praise of a king. However, clever Qine scholars have used it to point out injustice without causing the wrath of the King against them. The following poem presented before emperor Bakuffa points to the injustice of that time:

Impartial justice is practiced, O bakuffa, in your reign.  
While the poor man says,  
What we have heard, we have heard;  
Let your justice shine like the sun  
For all office and honour under the sky  
Is for those who have money. (S. Pankhurst, 1955, p. 259)

Like in the other traditional schools, student life in *Qine Bet* is massively implicated by the need to find food for one's maintenance. To overcome this challenge, the students had to share what they got from begging (Interview, May 12, 2011). A student who accomplished his *qine* study would normally travel to certify his knowledge to one of the famous centres of excellence of *qine*, in the country. Silvia Pankhurst (1955) noted two major centres of excellence: Bethlehem and Wadla. The first focuses on "beauty of melody and rhythm, of phrase and allusion and upon clarity of expression". Wadla focuses on "subtlety of meaning, allusion and construction, combined with adherence to strict grammatical rules" (S. Pankhurst, 1955, p. 247). The poems are often presented with the metaphor of Wax and Gold, *sem ena worq*. While the wax represents the obvious meaning of the poem, the Gold is the hidden meaning that can only be found with deeper investigation (Levine, 1972). The contribution of *Qine Bet* to the interpretative perspective in Ethiopia is as important as it is a school of critical thinking and innovation. It furnishes fresh insight and dynamism into the various aspects of life and the numerous possibilities of creating fresh perspectives out of archaic texts.

#### 4.5.3. *Metsehaf Bet*

*Metsehaf Bet*, the House of Books, is the highest level of study in Ethiopia's traditional education system. There are four special fields of study under it. The first is *Biluy Kidan*, or the study of the Books of Old Testament, which comprises the first forty-six Books of the Ethiopian Bible. The second branch is *Haddis Kidan*, or the study on the New Testament, which comprises the remaining thirty six books of the Bible. Here, what is studied is not just the text of the books in the Bible but the interpretation of the text in the Bible. There are no specific topics or subjects-categories under which relevant biblical verses are grouped together for class instruction. The study of *Biluy* and *Haddis Kidan* is basically a study of commentaries. It is the study of the interpretation the Bible as provided by church scholars. During class, students enter the room with bare foot, and sit surrounding the teacher. Then they read a text from the Geez Bible. The teacher first translates the text into Amharic, then provides the application of the text in various life contexts. He provides how the meaning of the text should be understood in relation to other texts, or in relation to different historical and social circumstances. . In this way, "...when each sentence or phrase of a text is interpreted, depending on the content, theological, moral and historical questions are raised, discussed, and developed" (Hable-Sellassie & Tamerat, 1970). The teacher jumps from one meaning of the text into another using the word *andimm* which amounts saying to "on the other hand". This method of interpretation is called *andimta tirguamme*.

*Tirgumm* could mean interpretation or the interpretation of the interpretation, and *tirguamme* is the process of doing either or both of these. In *tirguamme*, what is usually interpreted is not just the text but the *meaning* of the text (Interview, March 15, 2011). All in all, there are three types of doing *tirguamme* or interpreting a text. The first one is *ye'andimta tirguamme*, which is interpretation by enumerating the possible and alternative meanings of the text as exhaustively as possible. The second is *netela tirguame*, which is a singular interpretation of a text that requires no further interpretations. The third one is *yemister tirguamme*, which is the idiomatic interpretation of the text using analogies, heteronyms, and the meaning of other texts. *Yemister tirguamme* focuses on the hidden meaning and significance of the text by taking into account "the general contextual meaning of the whole sentence or paragraph"



(Jembere, 1998, p. 35). Often, the meaning of the text is compared with real life circumstances, or with the meanings of other texts to avoid contradiction in the overall understanding of a particular concept.

Excessive use of memory is the biggest challenge that students face in *Metshaf Bet* (Interview, Sept 18, 2011). Traditionally, lack of written materials has been the main reason for this. However, there is also the desire to maintain tradition, and to curb the infiltration of other religious views and ideologies (Interview, March 15, 2011). This is especially important in a context of historical events that took place in the history of the country when controversies over religious matters fissured the unity of church and state in Ethiopia (Tamrat, 1993). In the previous chapter, I have shown that, based on the Kebra Nagast, Ethiopians viewed their country as a covenant land, and an island of Christianity. Historically, this belief has enabled the country to remain as a predominantly Christian nation although it has been surrounded by Muslim enemies that had complicated its long distance relations to the Far East and Europe. Although external political and economic relations were severed, religious inspiration continued to stir cultural dynamism, one influencing the other, ultimately evolving into an indigenous Christianity that blended Judaic, Syriac, Byzantine, Arabic and Greek texts with indigenous beliefs and values. *Metsehaf Bet* has played the key role by weaving the various biblical texts with the cultural, historical and traditional life in the nation, by using metaphors, proverbs, and other attributes of culture to make sense of religious texts and vice versa. Commenting on the process of education in *Metsehaf Bet*, Hable-Selassie and Tamrat (1970) emphasized that in the *Metsehaf Bet*,

historical interpretations are mixed with legendary tales and special natural events, all considered to be miracles, and even concrete phenomena are given symbolical meanings. The expressions are vividly illustrated with parables, analogies, proverbs, and popular wisdom. Parallels are quoted from the history of the country while interpreting the passage on the Holy Land. Generally, the approach to reality is well mixed with mythical attitudes.

The two other branches of the *Metshaf Bet* are called *Liqawunit* and *Menekosat*. *Liqawunit* includes the study of the writings of the church fathers, the study of ecclesiastical and civil law, and the study of the computation of time and calendar under the name *Bahire Hasab*. In the school of *Liqawunit*, *Fetha Nagast* or the Judgment of Kings is a vital source of the study of law (Jembere, 1998). Initially, the book was drawn from various apostolic canons and laws. Budge (1928, p. 568) thinks that it was translated with “an Ethiopian flavour” from an Arabic text by a priest called Abraham. The *Fitha Nagast* along with the entire Ethiopian customary laws were dismissed from public use through the 1930 Penal Code and the 1960 Civil Code of Ethiopia, respectively (Jembere, 1998). *Menekosat* or the School of Monasticism is the study of monastic literature such as Rules of Pachominus, *Aregawi-Menfesawi* or Spiritual Precepts, *Lidete-Menekosat* or genealogy of monks and others (Wagaw, 1990, p. 39).

The traditional education system presented so far is not an exhaustive presentation of the entire system. Yet, it is indicative of the indigenous knowledge that has been preserved in a system of education for centuries. It cements the spirit of connection between the present and the future generations. In this regard, it would have been instructive for Ethiopian leaders to give heed to Isaac’s recommendation:

If Ethiopian self-understanding and national consciousness are to remain, a major portion of the subjects of traditional learning in the three levels of study must be retained. Much broader contact between the university and the church, in particular between its scholars, will be needed (Isaac, 1971, p. 1).

However, as will be demonstrated later in this thesis, Ethiopian elites ignored such recommendations from prominent figures and traditional elders, and adopted a new system that triumphs by destroying rather than preserving tradition.

#### **4.6. THE LEGACY OF INTERPRETATIVE TRADITION**

This section will focus on Ethiopia's tradition of knowledge production through novelty and synthesis of external sources. Traditional education in Ethiopia had the purpose of maintaining the belief in the providential destiny of Ethiopia, as a beloved nation of God. To this end, Ethiopian scholars were determined to introduce, translate, or invent various texts from internal and international sources. In the process of importing knowledge from sources outside the country, "the emphasis had always been on incorporating the imported materials into Ethiopian realities as perceived and understood by the scholars and scribes of the time" (Wagaw, 1990, pp. 47-48). In the process of doing this, Ethiopia's traditional scholars built a tradition of knowledge that became a context for the production of further knowledge using the church as the centre of intellectual life. Ullendorff (1965, p. 139) noted that the Ethiopian church tradition served as "a filter through which every facet of thought, old or new, had to pass to be accepted, rejected, or modified. How much was suppressed, and lost in this process can never be known". Ullendorff's concern here appears to be on the originality of knowledge, on the ideas that were lost or changed in the process of passing through the interpretative tradition of the Ethiopian church. What is neglected in this perspective, however, is an inquiry into the outcome of the creative blending between the Ethiopian tradition and the imported ideas, the field of knowledge that emerges out of the process of adapting "alien" ideas to a dynamic context. It is this field of knowledge which was dismissed as non-existent through the imitative model of education.

What drives the process of adapting knowledge was the search for wisdom in meaning. From the traditional point of view, meaning, which is "the essence of the text", is regarded as God's idea that can be reached through the guidance of the Spirit of God (Interview, March 19, 2011). Persons who interpreted texts needed divine support with appropriate qualification to reveal the meaning behind the text, or to interpret it. Involving God in the process of interpretation opened a greater interest in ethical inquiry and a field of knowledge open to the public. Guided by the conception of wisdom as discernment and humility, the incentive to the private ownership of knowledge did not exist. Stating his long years of intellectual journey, a *dabtara* described how "God was the beginner and the finisher of my journey" (Interview, March 15, 2011). Moreover,

traditionally, Ethiopian writers never put their own name at the beginning or the end of their book as authors.

Most of the church authors were monks who lived in monasteries which were famous centres for intellectual excellence. Based on the Maxim ‘*nibab yiqetil wotirguame yehayou*’ which is ‘text kills; but meaning heals’, they carefully rewrote the various texts they had obtained from outside the country (Interview, March 19, 2011). In the process, they enriched the scope of meaning and significance of the original texts. The detailed commentaries they wrote on the original texts, including the Bible, show the significance of interpretation over translation. The argument advanced here is that, in Ethiopia, before the beginning of the ‘modern’ period, relevance preceded originality, and interpretation was more important than translation. In this section, I will present a brief summary of the Ethiopian literary heritage followed by a more detailed discussion of five works that belong to the traditional intellectual legacy of the country.

#### **4.7. LITERARY TRADITION**

Ethiopia is often regarded as “the birth place of modern thought in Africa” (Makumba, 2007, p. 84) not just because of the existence of written literature, but also because of a culture that supports learning and intellectual pursuit as great qualities of a person. Intellectual pursuit, which was to be achieved through the interpretation of life using religious texts and vice versa, was an important aspect of Ethiopian thought (Sumner, 2005). Isaac (2013, p. 231-276) presented a good summary of the body of writing and literature that developed in the Ethiopian Orthodox church. The Bible is the primary religious text translated first from Greek (Septuagint) (Budge, 1928, p. 565). The Ethiopian Bible contains 81 books, 46 of which belong to the Old Testament, and 35 to the New Testament. According to Budge (1928), some of the translated materials manifest clear differences from their originals. For example, the arrangement of the Book of Ezra is unique, and the Books of Maccabees is “entirely different from those found in our Bible” (Budge, 1928, p. 505). The Book of Enoch and the Book of Jubilees are preserved in ge’ez in Ethiopia since the original texts have perished (Isaac, 2013, p. 235). Isaac (1983 ) confirmed that the Ethiopian version is the oldest and most reliable manuscript of all Enoch texts. Translated around the middle of the 4th century into

Geez, the book became the most widely translated and highly influential book of all Old Testament books on the New Testament (Charles, 1912). In addition to the Bible, various books, such as *kerilos*- the teaching of Cyril, *Serate Paqumis* or ascetic rules, and *physiologus* or *fisalgwos*- a book on animals and plants of ancient Greek were translated into Geez before the 7th Century. The main text of Ethiopia's national epic, *Kebra Nagast*, was part of the literary fruits of the 13th century. In the 13th century, detailed chronicles of Ethiopian kings appeared. These chronicles have been translated into Latin, French, Portuguese, German, English, Russian etc (Budge, 1928). However, as will be shown in later chapters these materials are excluded as sources for the teaching of Ethiopian history.

Universal history was an important field in traditional Ethiopian education. Summary of General History from Creation to 640 A.D., and The Universal History of Al-Makin (1213-1234), History of Alexander the Great, and the Book of *Abushakir*- a book of chronology with 59 chapters- are of the typical examples in this field. There were books in ecclesiastical and Civil Law that developed from Canons of the Apostles and the *Didascalia*, there were Apocriphical works, commentaries, theological books, hymn books, books on calendars and astronomy, biographical works, books on grammar etc. Translated from Hebraic sources the Sinodos "Synodicon", *Didssqthja* "Didascalia of the Apostles", *Metsehafe Kidan* "Testament of Our Lord", were designed to blend the Old Testament with the New Testament tradition (Haile, 1988, p. 233).

No exhaustive list of the books is known to have existed, let alone entirely translated into Amharic for the use of ordinary Ethiopians. It is known that since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ethiopia has lost immeasurable intellectual resources that had been accumulated during several centuries of its great past (Briggs, 2012, p. 103). The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is able to save a considerable amount of literature for its own spiritual purposes. Other sources of knowledge that govern secular affairs have been ignored or destroyed. As will be shown in the following chapters, the neglect of the intellectual heritage of the nation has led to the progressive abandonment of the internal worldview that Ethiopian pupils could have used to interpret knowledge. The following short commentary on five works illustrates the interpretative spirit that the Ethiopian intellectual heritage holds as a source of knowledge for education.

#### **4.7.1. *Fisalgwos***

Fisalgwos or Physiologue is a book translated from Greek into Geez, probably around the 5th Century (Sumner, 2005). It contains forty-eight chapters describing real and imaginary animals. While the original Greek book was written in a pagan setting, Ethiopian scholars translated it to serve the purpose of strengthening their own Christian beliefs. According to Sumner (2005, p. 329), the particular significance of the book is “the light it sheds on the Ethiopian medieval period, its rich symbolism and its rich set of moral values”. Another important aspect of the book is the particular style of knowledge adaptation, or importation that it followed. As one of the earliest works introduced based on Greek thinkers such as Aristotle, the translation process became a set standard that influenced the subsequent ways of importing knowledge into the country. Sumner comments on the process of incorporating Greek sources by Ethiopian scholars (2005, p. 217).

The author follows these sources step by step; but when the opportunity of adaptation to his allegories and to his religious speculations is suggested, he does not hesitate to elaborate them without scruple, abridging them, amplifying them, transforming them radically – a pattern of development and adaptation from original sources which will flourish in Ethiopia in the XVI century with the Book of the Philosophers and the Life and Maxims of Skendes.

The interpretative model Ethiopia followed aimed at reconciling two contrary interests. On the one hand, the time was a period when Greek philosophy spread throughout the Mediterranean and West Asian countries, following the conquest of Alexander the Great. On the other hand, it was also a time when Hellenistic Christianity was gaining momentum in the world (McLean, 2002). These two factors- universal philosophy and universal religion- were considered as centres of civilisation that started to pull the process of “global integration” towards Europe. Hence, Ethiopians had to

respond to the demand of this “global” pull towards “integration” by introducing one of the most fashionable books of that period. Secondly, in Ethiopia Christianity had already been indigenised with a national ideology that placed Ethiopia at the centre of the world. Hence, there was the desire not just to preserve what existed but also to use the new insight to affirm and to exemplify the internal conviction about the centrality of Ethiopia. It is the wisdom of reconciling these two interests that the Ethiopian translator of the *Fisalgwos* was concerned with –to not be isolated from the world without losing one’s identity and roots and to expand the mental orbit with the widening world by grounding oneself on a stable national centre.

#### **4.7.2. *Metsehafa Felasfa Tebiban, The Book of the Wise Philosophers***

*Metsehafa felasfa tebiban*, or also known as *angara falasfa*, or The Book of the Wise Philosophers was compiled and translated into Geez between 1510 and 1522. According to Sumner (1976), the Ethiopian text was translated from an Arabic text which in turn was a translation of a lost Greek original. The Philosophers refereed in the text include “Alexander, Aristotle, Democritus, Diogenes, Galan, Heraclius, Hermes, Hippocratus ... Plato, Porphyry, Ptolemy, Pythagoras, Sextus, Simonides, Socrates, Themistius, father of the Church like Basil and Gregory” (Budge, 1928, p. 218). The translation of the Book of the Philosophers according to Sumner was “the return of African philosophy to its home base” (2005, p. 219). Again, through the Ethiopian interpretative lens, the content of the book was developed and elaborated to fit the Ethiopian worldview that favoured indigenous perspectives.

The delivery of the content of the book was organised in a way a parent or a great teacher or an elder would advise a child, calling him/her “*lijie*” which means, “my son/daughter”. The contents are full of memorable maxims, parables and allegories, prepared in carefully crafted sentences for oral instruction. Reading the book projects a mental setting where a caring, wise, and affectionate teacher explains the most important messages of life and experience to his/her student. This method of instruction is popular in Africa and is often described as sage philosophy or philosophical sagacity (Oruka, 1990). Makumba (2007) considers that the *Metsehafa Falasfa Tebiban* and the *Life and Maxim of Skendes* resemble the “folk sagacity” Oruka used to express African

philosophical wisdom (Makumba, 2007, p. 84). The sayings are partly referenced to great philosophers of Greek, and to Roman figures as well as to Biblical figures, often with little regard to accuracy. On the other hand, part of the text is simply presented either without reference to any person or with the phrase- “it was said”. The themes raised in the book are consistent with the concept of wisdom presented in the previous chapter on the Kebra Nagast. Sumner (1998, p. 329) described how wisdom was presented in two senses in the book.

Philosophy is here understood in a wider sense as ‘wisdom’. Taken subjectively in the person who possesses it, wisdom includes the ability, the inclination and the steady purpose of putting knowledge to good use. Taking the term ‘wisdom’ in an objective sense and regarding it in a most general way, it is the sum total of the things worth knowing and working for.

Wisdom understood as “putting knowledge to good use” or as “the sum total of the things worth knowing and working for” illustrates the ethical and axiological aspect of knowledge emphasised in the previous chapter. A knowledgeable person is regarded “wise” for he/she is able to renounce the riches of the world in favour of wisdom, which includes the practice of the good, and the virtuous, *paideia*, even when what is considered good is in conflict with self-interest.

#### **4.7.3. *Zena Skendes Tebib, The life and Maxim of Skendes***

According to Sumner (1981) the text of Skendes has two Western, two Eastern and one African version. The Western versions are Greek and Latin; the Eastern, Syriac and Arabic; and the African, Geez. These versions are neither the same nor were they devoted to the same goal. The Greek text of Oedipus was pagan, and the Arabic was neither pagan nor Christian, while the Ethiopian text was entirely Christian. Sumner presented the Life and Maxim of Skendes as “an Ethiopian version of the Oedipus story” (Sumner, 1981, p. 330).



Skendes in Ethiopia represents Oedipus in Greek mythology but there are important differences between the two. Skendes grew up and studied in Athens and Berttus, but Oedipus in Corinth. Skendes meets his mother and sleeps with her, but Oedipus meets his father and kills him and then marries his mother. In both stories, the mother (Jocasta in Greek) hangs herself. But the sanction the main character imposed upon himself varied. In the Ethiopian version, Skendes imposed absolute silence and communicated 153 maxims in writing while Oedipus gouges his eyes and disappears inexplicably. Unlike *Skendes* of the Ethiopian version, the shocking story of *Odiepus* of the Greek version is very popular in the world, and popular stories are important signposts for the propagation of certain ideas or theories.

Sigmund Freud (2010) drew the term “Oedipus complex” to express what he thought was a universal human psychological phenomena that occurs at the phallic stage of human development. He used the Oedipus story to illustrate the theory about the first sexual attraction of a boy towards his mother and his murderous wish against his father. “King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta, merely shows us the fulfilment of our own childhood wishes” (Freud, 2010, p. 280).

Here, the Freudian approach treats the story of Oedipus as a psychological case and interprets it to suggest that “all men are incestuous and parricides in the depth of their psyche” (Sumner, 1981, p. 442). However, according to the Ethiopian text, Skendes was 36 years old, and he deliberately planned to taste his mother to disprove the teaching of philosophers that says “all women are prostitutes”. The Ethiopian translator treated Skendes as a Christian adult man who believed that “the veracity of a statement is in need of a testing, that is of an experimentation” (Sumner, 1981, p. 28). According to the Ethiopian translator, the motive of the main character Skendes was sapiential, wisdom. Like the Queen of Sheba before him and the great philosopher Zara Yacob after him, the author saw wisdom as “light” of the soul, and of reason (Sumner, 1981, p. 54 & 446).

While the modern reader of Oedipus may follow Freud’s interpretation and discovers the master of accomplishment and the rebel of parental tyranny, or the “solar hero who murders his procreator, the darkness; shares his couch with the mother, the gloaming, from whose lap the dawn, he has been born, and dies blinded, as the setting

sun” (Rank, Richter, & Lieberman, 2004, p. 10), the Ethiopian reader of *Zena Skendes* on the other hand could discover the wise Skendes who took silence, humility, and repentance as the great qualities of life. The purpose for which the story was written suggests the diverse possibilities interpretation could afford in producing new insights with changing contexts.

In Ethiopia, the story of Skendes was presented to solidify a person’s determination to endure ascetic life. The admonishing of women as excessively lecherous (Sumner, 1981, pp. 44-45) may have this aim in the mind of the “translator” of that time, although this is clearly imprudent and injudicious. Further, Sumner’s comparative analysis of the difference between the Arabic and the Ethiopian text depicts how the interpretative mindset operated in the process of importing knowledge from outside sources to fit the worldview at home. The translation, according to Sumner (1981, p. 437), represents a “translation activity that flourished during the whole span of Ethiopic thought”. The following quote represents the interpretation method that Ethiopian scholars employed to introduce new insights from outside the country until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

A careful comparison between the Ethiopic and the Arabic texts shows that the Ethiopian translator very often departs from the Arabic original. He both subtracts and adds. ...The Ethiopian translator is clearly distinguishable as a deeply thinking person with a very sensitive power of perception. He is a man for whom reflection is a habit. He places himself, as it were, inside the characters he introduces; he feels with them; he understands clearly and thoroughly their sorrows and their joys. Thanks to such a fine portraying of moods and temperaments, the story is ethically deepened, its rather crude and shocking content is ennobled and made more acceptable so that there can be no doubt: the Secundus story as it is conveyed in Ethiopic is the most perfect, the most morally exalted and the most chastened of

all the preserved Secundus accounts (Sumner, 1981, pp. 437-438).

What is significant in this approach is the conviction that knowledge has to be contextualised; to be meaningful it needs to be absorbed by the culture, value and needs of the people concerned. The significant message of the knowledge incorporation process is not the understanding of what existed as thought but how thought could develop through careful adaptation and reinterpretation of relevant texts from abroad, through the art of creative incorporation. As Sumner (1980, p. 396) concluded: “Ethiopians never translate literally ... they add, subtract, and modify... a foreign work becomes indigenous not through originality of invention but originality of style”. This legacy of knowledge production was totally dismissed by “modern” Ethiopian elites who chose not to interpret or incorporate but imitate western texts with complete disregard to the Ethiopian context as shown in the forthcoming chapters.

#### ***4.7.4. The Ethiopic Versions of the books of Alexander the Great***

Further aspects of the interpretative approach to knowledge production could be discerned from the series of ‘translated’ books regarding the story of Alexander the Great. The available Ethiopic versions of the story are contained in six books, and the Ethiopic version, according to Silvia Pankhurst (1955, p. 218) can be regarded as an “original” work. Although the time for the writing of the book is not provided, it is estimated that the book was written in Ethiopia in the thirteenth century. The author/s did not translate the story literally. Instead, they transformed the story of Alexander to fit the Ethiopian Judo-Christian precepts and values. What appears to be governing their work was adherence not to the authenticity of the original text but to the centrality of the context. Hence, fundamental changes have been introduced. In the words of Silvia Pankhurst (1955, p. 29), “Alexander’s victory in the chariot races described in the Greek version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes is discarded. Greek gods are transformed into Old Testament prophets. Pagan kings and queens express Christian sentiments”.

The book exemplifies wisdom as the cardinal virtue of kings- a theme repeatedly emphasised in the Kebra Nagast. Alexander was instructed to write “a book of wisdom”

where he gave advice about parents' responsibilities to educate their children, kings and governors responsibilities "not to pervert justice, nor to prosecute the poor...but to give of their possessions to the needy and to the stranger" (S. Pankhurst, 1955, p. 229). The Ethiopian Geez romance of Alexander may be compared to the reign of Zagwe emperors especially with King Lalibela who was a king and a priest at the same time. Studies also indicated that the books on Alexander were translated in the thirteenth century when Lalibela was king.

By adopting and incorporating the knowledge of their contemporaries, Ethiopian traditional scholars utilised tradition as an engine of progress. The desire to maintain tradition did not entail isolation from the external world. Tradition involved the process of analysing and interpreting knowledge from outside, then producing a more refined result towards a broader future. This is an example of Ethiopia's indigenous knowledge production process currently lost as a result of the imitative model of modern education, as will be shown in Chapter Seven.

#### **4.8. CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY: *HATETA ZE ZARA YACOB***

The critical philosophical investigation, *hatata Ze Zara Yacob*, or Expressions of Zara Yacob, is an iconic traditional philosophical investigation (Kiros, 2005.; Sumner, 1976). Zara Yacob was a scholar of the traditional school system who studied in the *Qine Bet* for four years, and in the *Mestehaf Bet* for ten years. The philosophy of Zara Yacob and his disciple Wolda Hiwot illustrates a critical reflection on the unconscious, collective and shared beliefs that were dominant in Ethiopia at that time.

Like his contemporary Rene Descartes in Europe, Zara Yacob was interested in reaching the truth through reason. He raised questions on the beliefs and customs of his society. If God really exists, he asked, why and how should one communicate with God? Should one accept all traditions and dogmas of the society he/she belongs to? The answers to such questions are provided in the texts that he studied for more than a decade. Starting from *nibab bet*, one can assume that he knew that humans are created by God, and the Bible should be accepted without question. But, Zara Yacob thought our intelligence would guide us to God better than religious books or customary beliefs. He

thought, ‘If it is truth we want, let us seek it with our reason which God has given us so that with it we may see that which is needed for us’ (Sumner, 1976, p. 13).

Zara Yacob was puzzled by a variety of truth claims made by Copts, Catholics, Jews and Moslems regarding truth. He thought, “As my faith appears true to me, so does another one finds his own faith true; but, truth is one” (Sumner, 1976, p. 7). While still asking such critical questions, he continued to practice his faith. He prays to God to be intelligent. He then proceeds with his critical perspective saying “We cannot, however, reach truth through the doctrine of men, for all men are liars” (Sumner, 1976, p. 13).

Sumner (1976) identified three presuppositions in the philosophical method of Zara Yacob. These were the necessity of critical investigation of all faiths and beliefs, the need to consider reason as a light that guides us to truth, and the goodness of all created things (Sumner, 2004, p. 176). Kiros (2005.) compares Zara Yacob’s method with Descartes to suggest that affirmation as opposed to doubting is a distinguished contribution in the *hatata*. The shift between belief and reason, certainty and doubt, critics and affirmation in Zara Yacob provides an important methodological insight to learning. Based on the original text and several commentaries, two important modes of thought in the *hatata* are relevant to this point. These are notions of habitual knowledge and critical reflection.

Habitual knowledge is obtained from experience and from being in a social setting. The corpus of human experience inscribed in our conscious and unconscious mind provides us the knowledge or comprehension of what has existed, been believed, or valued in society. However, critical reflection, as can be understood from Zara Yacob, is a constant pursuit to improve or make sense of the habitual knowledge that one acquires in society. Zara Yacob was educated in the Orthodox Church and was also a teacher there. He surely understands the scripture’s point of view regarding the existence of God or morality. However, he was also grappling with the critical mind that looks for reason for these beliefs. He asked, “If God is the guardian of men, how is it that their nature is this deeply corrupted?” “How does God know? Is there anyone in heaven who knows? Or if there is anyone who knows why does he remain silent on men’s depravity while they corrupt his name and act with iniquity in his holy name?” While staying in this critical mode, he soon shifts to the habitual mode, and prays in faith before the God

whom he was searching for through reason. He prays to God to make him intelligent, to reveal to him His “hidden” wisdom. The combined work of the habitual and the critical mind advances the inquiry, gives it context and purpose. For example, Zara Yacob’s knowledge of the prayer of David reminds him the verse which says: “Is the inventor of the ear unable to hear?” then, his critical mode intercepts and asks “Who is that who provided me with an ear to hear, who created me as a rational [being], and how have I come into this world?” (Sumner, 1976).

The relationship between the habitual and the critical mind is not necessarily contradictory. The habitual mind provided Zara Yacob with enormous resources. His experience as a teacher and a student, the conflict between Orthodox believers and the Catholics, and the prosecution he suffered— these events and circumstances were registered in his mind as meaningful experiences that provided resources to his critical inquiry towards truth. His cultural life and experience constituted the knowledge that served as a context for critical reflection. While the habitual mind tends to look backward, towards culture and experience, or towards the familiar, the critical mind looks forward, towards the new, and both share a cultured mindset that drives intellectual development from interacting with one another.

One can also consider the methodological approach Zara Yacob followed to knowledge in general and to education in particular as an additional contribution. “From an intellectual viewpoint, Zera Yacob was a dove, free and independent, as he soared over the jagged divisions of the earth with its mountains and chasms huddled one against the other” (Sumner, 2004, p. 195). Here, it is important to note that this “free and independent” mind hovers over the landscape of knowledge filled with the terrain of diverse experience, which can be regarded as culture. The breadth of knowledge he acquired from experience has a direct bearing on the stretch of his imagination and the depth of his reflection. The critical questions he raised were pertinent to issues in his society. Habitual knowledge without critical reflection is static; and critical reflection without habitual knowledge is erratic. This methodological approach provides an interesting insight into the Interpretative Model of Education that I have sketched so far. What has been provided so far under the intellectual legacy of Ethiopia is the wealth of knowledge accumulated from the traditional education system with which Zara Yacob

was an accomplished scholar. Thus, Zara Yacob's *hatata* should be considered not as a negation of Ethiopia's cultural belief systems, but as a contribution to it (Asfaw, 2004).

In the process of accumulating the wealth of knowledge from various sources such as *Fisalgwos*, Oedipus or Skendes, Alexander the Great etc., Ethiopia's traditional scholars used what Sumner (1998, p. 443) called "creative incorporation", the process of subjecting the imported knowledge to domestic beliefs and interests. What has been brought from outside was incorporated into the inside, not the other way around. Zara Yacob appeared to have gone even further by trying to avoid the prioritization of the inside over the outside; by putting all beliefs, including his own, equally, under the critical, rational, intellectual investigation of the human mind. But, it should be noted that the critical mind is cultured by the context from where it departs to hover in pursuit of truth, and to where it returns with what it has discovered through such pursuit. It is the constant dialogue with the context that produces knowledge however the nature of that dialogue may vary. The mind cannot "hover" or circulate in a vacuum. Thus, Zara Yacob's *hatata* is not a total negation of traditional or cultural experience. It is an affirmation of faith and of culture by the use of reason- a philosophical method for the possible fashioning of human experience through the practice of critical inquiry.

#### **4.9. CONCLUSION**

This chapter presented an important aspect of Ethiopia's traditional legacy that could have been used as a source of knowledge for education. This legacy is presented under the traditional education system. The chapter focused on two important processes involving the traditional education system. The first one is the process of learning in the traditional education system from the lower to the higher level of study. The existence of such a sophisticated indigenous system provides a background and context for intergenerational transmission of wisdom and values. It promoted the key axiological imperatives– the notion of covenant, wisdom, service, and centre– that were upheld in the long political and social history of the country. For instance, the notion of covenant presented in the previous chapter, is extended here to cover the personal conviction of the student to pursue wisdom. Believing that students are chosen by the will of God for a destiny of service, they endure a harsh living condition in search for wisdom. The free

service they give to the people at church and the daily leftovers they would gather from the public to sustain themselves at school rooted them in the culture of the people. In this respect, the Ethiopian Orthodox church provided a fertile intellectual context for modern ideas to flourish (Isaac, 2013).

The second important point is the legacy of knowledge production in Ethiopia. This methodological insight is fundamentally important to the African continent as it negates the basis of knowledge extroversion. While ideas were gathered from a range of sources, including from non-Christian materials, they were moulded and remade to serve the national precepts and values at home. This process is known as *tirguamme*— a method of interpretation studied at the higher level of education, and employed by Ethiopian scholars who incorporated books from Hebraic, Greek, and Arabic originals. *Tirguamme* is guided by the principle of ‘*nibab yiqetil wotirguamme yehayou*’ “text kills; but meaning heals”. Any text, irrespective of its source, is considered raw and is thus in need of interpretation. Consequently, even the Bible had to be translated into the local context and its commentaries studied by heart in the *Metsehaf Bet*. The interpreted texts by virtue of interpretation form intellectual legacy that should be understood as original works, or contributions to knowledge. The significance of the *hatata* of Zara Yacob is not due to its similarity or difference with Descartes rationalism but because it is the fruit of the *qine bet* and the *Metsehaf bet*; it exemplifies the dynamism and hope germane to the interpretative spirit in Ethiopia.

Currently, Ethiopian church scholars still express national sentiments, and uphold the interpretative perspectives discussed in this and the previous chapter. However, since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is a marked decline in this respect. Largely, Ethiopian governments since then, and to some extent the Orthodox Church leaders propounded alien ideologies that undermined the principles of the Kebra Nagast and the interpretative legacy of the traditional education system, which is the main topic of the next chapter. In a more general sense, the central argument being advanced throughout this chapter and thesis is that people should not be disconnected from their traditional experiences because their experiences embody the most important resources



for their education. Only in this way, education becomes an internally driven and dynamic cultural experience.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **TRANSITION FROM KINGDOM TO ELITDOM**

#### **5.1. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter will reconstruct the emergence of western education in Ethiopia in a context of the country's transition from the rule of Kingdom to Elitdom. Historical event analysis is used to present the growth of consciousness of power that facilitated this transition since the period of Tewodros IV. As outlined in Chapter One, consciousness of power refers to the development of the influence of western power interests in the minds of Ethiopian leaders. Elitdom represents the modernist system that developed under the influence of consciousness of power.

In this chapter the suicide of Tewodros and the storming of the national treasure at Mekdela is first proposed as a turning point for the emergence of a growing consciousness of power towards the west in Ethiopia. The emergence of imitativeness through the institutionalisation of western legal and educational systems is then presented. Finally, it is argued that the fundamental irrelevancy of education to the people in Ethiopia took place at this time through the institutionalisation of imitated concepts and structures that made Eurocentrism appear as a natural path towards modernity.

#### **5.2. TEWODROS II AND THE RISE OF CONSCIOUSNESS OF POWER**

This section presents the rise and fall of Tewodros II of Ethiopia as significant historical background. The reason for the consideration of Tewodros's era here is to present an often neglected version of Ethiopia's initiation towards industrial innovation and its frustrating end during this period. Many historians presented Tewodros as a war hero, a ruthless leader, a reformer and a state builder who started the reunification of the country. Culturally, he is one of the most sung heroes in the history of Ethiopia. Fictions, poems, songs, and paintings present Tewodros as a defiant hero. However,

after rigorously analysing the documentary material of relevance to this study, I argue that there is a *historical event* that took place during Tewodros that could be considered as a turning point in Ethiopia's transition from Kingdom to Elitdom. This historical event is symbolised by the suicide of Tewodros and the looting and destruction of the national treasure, at Mekdela. The Mekdela event unfolded a turning point that influenced subsequent state initiatives to be reminded of the lesson of the historical event, and the power interest that contributed to its occurrence. The recurring and forceful message of the historical event was consciousness of power. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, Ethiopian rulers adopted a consciousness of power that gradually shifted Ethiocentrism to Eurocentrism.

### **5.2.1. *The Rise of Tewodros II (1855-1868)***

The rise of Tewodros II is important to show an instance of an indigenous modernization process that started in Ethiopia. According to Pankhurst (1990a, p. 132), Tewodros can be regarded as an innovator who initiated "Ethiopia's first industrial revolution" in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Both the rise of Tewodros to power and his modernization program were initiated and guided by the belief in a covenant nation ruled by the ideal king, as provided in the Kebra Nagast. Tewodros attempted to implement this image of greatness in a national context that was devastated by civil war during *Zamana Mesafint* or the Era of the Princes (1855-1868).

In Ethiopia, the period between 1800 and 1855 was called *Zamana Masafint*. The power of the central state was weakened as the country was divided among regional lords who battled to control the centre by putting the Emperor under their influence. The end of this rather daunting era was foretold by the Ethiopian book of prophesy called *Fikare Eyesus*. This book, in addition to verses taken from the Bible, had a prophetic text about the coming of a just king to end the corrupt era of the *Zemana Masafint*. According to Wolde-Aregay (1990) these two important prophetic sources facilitated the rise of Tewodros II as a strong king empowered to end the reckless period of war and injustice. Tewodros defeated many of his opponents and started a modernisation program that included innovation, reformation, and solidarity.

### 5.2.2. *Innovation – ‘it is possible to make everything in Habesha’*

In 1861 Tewodros II decided to execute an experiment in the manufacturing of cannons in Ethiopia. A French metal-caster in Ethiopia called Jaquin volunteered to make a mortar if the other Europeans in the country would come to his aid. The king ordered the missionaries who came to the country to preach the gospel to work under Jaquin. Then, a blast furnace was built, and traditional bellows installed to melt the iron. At the first attempt, the furnace melted before the iron reached the melting point. Frustrated by the failed attempt, Jaquin left the team but the King remained determined to advance the project using the missionaries as part of the team. After repeated attempts and innumerable failures, a small sized canon was manufactured. One of the missionaries quoted the joy of Tewodros at the occasion as, “Now I am convinced that it is possible to make everything in *Habesha* [Ethiopia]. Now the art has been discovered; God at last has revealed Himself. Praise and thanks be to Him for it” (Pankhurst, 1990a, p. 129). The manufacturing of canons using traditional equipment signifies the birth of a new hope for an internally driven progress that actively interacts with its environment.

This innovation was an important confirmation of the modernizing perspective that “it is possible to make everything in *Habesha*” (Pankhurst, 1990a, p. 129). The facility used to manufacture the cannon was the result of traditional skills. Ethiopians knew how to melt iron, and make spears, plowshares, knives etc. The transformation of the equipment of traditional blacksmiths into a gun-making factory was recorded by the British traveler Henry Dufton. He wrote, “Every encouragement is given by the king to his people in their endeavors to perfect themselves in the manufacture of these implements, for he is fully aware that this is the best way to secure his independence of other nations” (Pankhurst, 1990a, p. 130). The production of weapons continued without the support of the British whom Tewodros first saw as an ally but later as enemy. After seeing the fall of his loyal generals and the betrayal of part of his army, the Ethiopian king committed suicide when the British, supported by local adversaries, stormed his fortress at Mekdala to stop the dangerous experiment. At that time, “the Ethiopian ruler had 24 brass cannons, four iron cannons and nine brass mortars, the latter all made in Ethiopia ‘some with neat inscriptions in Amharic’” (Pankhurst, 1990a, p. 131). After

capturing Mekdala, the British “destroyed all of the Ethiopian guns which had been cast with such difficulty” (Pankhurst, 1990a, p. 132).

The industrial initiatives pursued by Tewodros were not limited to the making of cannons. There were also road and vehicle construction, and boat building efforts. The road construction was designed to link the towns of Gondar, Gojjam and Mekdela. According to British eyewitness “[the] craftsmen, with Tewodros’s approval, at about this time also constructed a carriage to travel on these roads, one of the first such vehicles ever seen in the land” (Pankhurst, 1990a, p. 134). Henry Blanc, one of the British missionaries who was present at the construction work, observed that

[f]rom early dawn untill late at night Theodore was himself at work; with his own hands he removed stones, leveled the ground, or helped to fill up small ravines. No one could leave as long as he was there himself; no one would think of eating, drinking, or of rest, while the Emperor showed the example and shared the hardships’ (quoted in Pankhurst, 1990a, p. 135).

Blanc noted that, the road was admired as “remarkable work” with “a kingly structure” and was “creditable even to a European engineer” (quoted Pankhurst, 1990a, pp. 135-136).

Another industrial initiative undertaken by Tewodros was the effort at boat building. When the missionaries pleaded ignorance to this initiative, Tewodros spent almost one month in April 1866 attempting to build what he called was “an imitation of a steamer” (Pankhurst, 1990a, p. 136). Another British observer was reported to have written:

Two large boats, sixty feet long and twenty feet wide midships, with wooden decks, and a couple of wheels affixed to the sides of each to be turned by a handle like that attached to a common grindstone, were accordingly constructed (Rassam quoted in Pankhurst, 1990a, p. 136).

Although the effort failed as the material used was of unsuitable quality to a steam boat, it nevertheless was the first attempt to build a navy in the country, and it had a far reaching lessons to break the myth of impossibility in relation to industrial innovation, in Africa.

### **5.2.3. *The pursuit of solidarity and the fall of Tewodros***

Tewodros pursued friendly cooperation with Britain based on the value of Christian fraternity. Surrounded by Moslem countries, and facing the threat of Turkish and Egyptian invasions, Tewodros assumed that he would create a friendly alliance with the British due to his Christian faith. His letters strongly reflected these sentiments. His letter to Queen Victoria reflected this as he wrote, "...as you are a child of Christ and I am a child of Christ, for the sake of Christ I am seeking amity and friendship" (Asfaw & Appleyard, 1979, p. 1b). The relationship he tried to establish with Britain was based on the principle of searching wisdom through humility as provided in the Kebra Nagast. In a letter that appears to be exceptionally important, as it details the date of its authorship to be "7358 years after the creation of the world, 1858 years after the birth of the Lord, in the year of Mark, in the month of megabit, on the six day", Tewodros wrote to Queen Victoria: "May God having placed in your heart friendship and love for me, grant that you may open my blind eyes for my sake" (Asfaw & Appleyard, 1979, p. 11b).

In another letter, he wrote:

Now, what I require is wisdom, so that my eyes may be illuminated for I am blind. But now, so that I may be happy just as you are happy, by the power of God have skilled men sent to me (Asfaw & Appleyard, 1979, p. 15b).

Teworos's adherence to the traditional views of wisdom and humility as contained in the Kebra Nagast is clear from the conception of wisdom as light, ignorance as blindness, humility as virtue, and boastfulness as vice. In the Kebra Nagast, The Queen of Sheba used the word "light" to represent wisdom; and humility was the method through which wisdom would be acquired (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 20). Humility

builds relationships by initiating the mutual moral obligation of the parties concerned to extend a helping hand to one another.

Tewodros' correspondences were full of the expression "by the power of God" as an introductory phrase to almost all promises and actions. He asked for technical skills or "light" as he called it, from Britain with the greatest possible humility, calling himself the "untutored Ethiopian" and "a blind donkey" that needed the sight of technology. Considering that humility is a virtue in Christianity, he believed his expression would be understood as the sign of a wise emperor who was clean from the vice of arrogance. However, Tewodros did not receive responses to the letters he wrote. Even worse, he learned that the British were actually supporting the expansionist ambitions of Khedive Ismael of Egypt into the northern territories of Ethiopia (S. Pankhurst, 1955, p. 509). Infuriated by this neglect, and by internal rebellion, he started to take harsh measures. He punished his opponents severely, and imprisoned the British diplomats and few missionaries alleging that they "insulted" him (Haile-Selassie, 1996).

The British who did not bother to send few artisans for the humble requests of Tewodros at the beginning, decided to send a heavily armed battalion to capture or kill him. With the assistance of powerful Ethiopian allies who wanted to overthrow Tewodros, the troops arrived at his capital Mekdela. After the loss of many of his troops, Tewodros chose to take his own life rather than to surrender himself to the British. What had occurred at that particular time in history became a defining moment in Ethiopia. The British troops looted and burned several rare Ethiopian intellectual resources that were painfully gathered by Tewodros for the National Library he had built at Mekdela. It was reported that "some 200 mules and 15 elephants were needed to carry the loot down to the Dalanta plain" (R. Pankhurst, 1990, p. 224). The entire collection of royally illuminated parchments, books, manuscripts and other objects were left scattered covering the whole surface of the rocky citadel. To add insult to injury, "The British sappers set fire to all buildings so that no trace was left of the edifices which once housed the manuscripts" (R. Pankhurst, 1990, p. 224).

The most significant development about the storming of Mekdela was the initiation of consciousness of power with the recognition of the existence of a European gaze that seeks to discipline the developmental path of the country along its own

interests. The destruction of Tewodros' implements, his suicide and the looting of the treasury of the national capital created an inward looking policy that made his successors focus on strengthening their internal political power base rather than pursuing innovative approaches.

Tewoderos's successor, Yohannis IV, was very suspicious of Ethiopians educated in Europe, and was interested in religious conversion towards Orthodox Christianity. He was driven towards developing internal crafts rather than importing foreign artisans from abroad, and was disinterested in sending Ethiopians to study overseas (Pankhurst, 1990b, p. 256-257). The handcraft work at his court was remarkably well advanced. A British eyewitness reported the production of tools, jewelry, embroidery, royal closing, goldsmiths and silversmiths who produced "ear-rings, hairpins, bracelets, the lighter ornaments for the shields and sword-handles and the head stalls of the mule and horses were of filigree; lockets, bosses for the shield, harness and saddle" (S. Pankhurst, 1955, p. 512). According to the eyewitness, the production of Ethiopian crosses was 'much prettier' than anything he had witnessed in Europe (S. Pankhurst, 1955, p. 513). He also saw the leather workers who produced "shields, scabbards, saddlers, harness, belts... bags of all sizes, bandoliers, cartridge belts, pouches and sandals". Women's handcraft such as colourful baskets, grass bottles and bowls that are "perfectly watertight" with the finest embroidery, "many women wore slippers or sandals, and anklets and bracelets of silver, with silver necklaces and small circular, square, or triangular lockets, beautifully wrought, with tiny ear-rings of gold or silvergilt" (S. Pankhurst, 1955, pp. 512-515). He emphasized that "There is no lack of skill in the country", and deplored the absence of commerce between Ethiopia and Europe blaming the Egyptian Government for keeping it "entirely locked from the outer world" (S. Pankhurst, 1955, p. 514).

Following Emperor Yohannis, Emperor Menilik II focused on reunifying and bringing the southern parts of the country into an effective administrative control. He forged a new era of relationship with the west that grew to a fully-fledged system of westernization during the period of Haile Selassie I. Since the historical event at Mekdela, the relationship with Europe was heavily influenced by consciousness of



power as manifested in the longing for the firearms and artisans of Europe. Eventually, Europe became a model of civilization that can be copied through education.

#### **5.2.4. *Lessons: why is it impossible to make everything in Habesha?***

Based on the accounts of European missionaries and other sources, Pankhurst presented Tewodros IV as an innovator who initiated an “industrial revolution” in Ethiopia (Pankhurst, 1990a). At the time of my field work, I looked into the Grade 12 students’ history textbook (MOE, 2006a) to see how the story of Tewodros was presented. The text book, which was in use at the time of the field work for this research, is prepared under the Ministry of Education of the country. Two observations could be made from reading the story of Tewodros in the text book. First, the text provides *Zamana Masafint* (1769-1855), the period of political fragmentation and power rivalry among regional lords, as a historical context out of which Tewodros arose to power. Second, the text provides Tewodros’ ambition for the reunification and modernisation of the country using the firearms and skills of Europeans. At no point, was Tewodros mentioned as an innovator. Instead, he was presented as a merciless tyrant who “treated rebellious regions very harshly, punishing most commonly with cutting off captives’ limbs, burning houses and harvest to ashes and looting the local people” (MOE, 2006a, p. 58). Although instances of this nature might have occurred, several eyewitnesses, including European missionaries and envoys, whom Tewodros had put in prison, had written about the greatest qualities Tewodros had. He was described as a person with humility, knowledge and “iron perseverance” to achieve his goals (Pankhurst, 1990a, p. 135). His chronicler Debetara Zanaab and others had written that Tewodros followed a “messianic leadership” that changed the fears and sufferings of the poor and defenceless under *Zamana Masafint* (Wolde-Aregay, 1990, p. 105). He changed his name from Kassa to Tewodros to identify himself with Tewodros I of Ethiopia who was revered as the most righteous king before him. He was not a religious fanatic as he stood against the church’s material possession and went to the extent of detaining the Patriarch to support the poor; he prohibited slave trade, looting, and showed moral leadership to his followers. Despite these historical evidences, the text book seems to have emphasised Tewodros’ cruelty and imitative adventures.

Imitativeness is where the text book appeared more sympathetic towards Tewodros' ambition for modernisation. "[Tewodros] wanted to see his countrymen learn from the technical advances made by West European countries" (MOE, 2006a, p.59). Then, it provides:

When his tireless struggle to get skilled personnel from Europe turned fruitless, he gathered European missionaries living in his country and persuaded them to manufacture firearms at his gun foundry of Gafat, near Debre Tabor. Obeying the king's orders, the missionaries repaired broken firearms and manufactured several cannons including the mortar named Sebastopol (MOE, 2006a, p. 58).

In contrast to Pankhurst who draws on the documentation of the accounts of European eyewitnesses, this presentation does not consider the involvement of Ethiopians who brought iron and brass from all over the country, the blacksmiths who transformed their traditional bellows to blow air into the gigantic furnace, and the role of Tewodros himself who "worked with his own hands" (Pankhurst, 1990a, p. 135). Walter Plowden, a British diplomat reported to his country foreign office about Tewodros as, "Some of his ideas may be imperfect, others impracticable..., but a man who... has done so much and contemplates such large designs, cannot be regarded as an ordinary stamp" (Pankhurst, 1990a, p. 141).

Tewodros' jumpstart initiative into the scale of manufacturing weapons in Africa was an aggressive violation of the colonial myth about the primitivism of Africans. To initiate modernization without or in defiance of the influence of the disciplinary consciousness of power is the major lesson of his initiative. The disciplinary power of the European gaze with the forces of its objectifying thoughts and exploiting practices was rejected to his death. The undermining of Tewodros' story as a source of national inspiration, the exaggeration of the role of the missionaries in his manufacturing initiatives, and the regard of Tewodros' innovation as a sound effort towards

imitativeness supports the internalisation of Eurocentrism among Ethiopian historiographers.

### **5.3. EUROPEAN LAWS FOR ETHIOPIAN TRADITIONS**

This section focuses on the legalisation of elitdom as a system. It shows how the traditional and customary laws of the country were scrapped and replaced with imitated European laws in order to create a new way of ruling society. In Ethiopia, since the advent of consciousness of power towards the west, the concept of *addis*, the “new”, has a strong fervent that reverberated a zeal towards a new world, a new life and destiny. The new is often considered as *zemenawi*, which means modern or western. The first modern capital of the country was named “Addis Ababa”, which means “New Flower”. Moreover, the Ethiopian leaders since the rise of Haile Selassie to power in the 1930s used popular slogans vowing for the birth of a new Ethiopia, and the new is always imagined by its distinction from the old or tradition. Law became an instrument with which the power of custom and tradition could be obliterated and replaced by modern systems in Ethiopia.

Berman’s (2003, p. 3) conception of tradition is useful here to understand the relationship between law and tradition in the west.

By tradition I mean the sense of an ongoing historical continuity between past and future, and in law, the organic development of legal institutions over generations and centuries, with each generation consciously building on the work of its predecessors. ... Characteristically Western is the concept of a “body” of law that consciously develops in time that “grows” over generations and centuries. It is presupposed, in the Western legal tradition, that legal change does not occur at random but proceeds by conscious reinterpretation of the past to meet present and future needs. The law evolves, is ongoing, it has a history, it tells a story.

From this perspective, tradition and law are not necessarily antagonistic to each other. Law could be understood as a refined stage of evolving traditions. One can trace the origin of European law to Greek and Roman legal traditions. German Lutheranism and English Calvinism were important traditions for the development of the Civil, and the Common law systems in Europe. Later, European imperial powers applied their own laws in their respective colonies. Currently, most countries follow either the common law or the civil law system largely because of their colonial history and tradition. The greatest damage that colonialism caused not just to the colonised but to the world at large was the destruction of the culture of the colonised (Bodley, 2008). Based on this historical observation, one can see that while Europe cultivated its traditions to grow organic laws at home, colonised countries were made to destroy their traditions to allow the transplantation of European laws into their soils. Consequently, the African state is sometimes considered neither African nor a state, because it has no roots in the life of society (Englebert, 1997). In the absence of direct colonialism, the transplantation of European laws into Ethiopia took a slightly different course.

The legal history of Ethiopia reveals a deep anachronism between traditional and modern conceptions of law. Here, traditional conceptions are considered as norms of legitimacy, values related to what are understood as justice and truth, emanating from the culture and beliefs of the people. What is acceptable and what is not is internalised by members of the society who hold common stories in which they express their identities, experiences, and aspirations. From this perspective, tradition is the source of validation for social rules. It also includes processes and relationships that could serve to sanction compliance, or deal with violations. Thus, it determines norms for the legitimacy of authority in politics. In Ethiopia, despite a long history of legal tradition, the leaders failed to update, or incorporate the country's rich traditions into its laws. Instead, European laws were copied and pasted on to a culturally variant social and political context.

Jembere (1998, p. 166) noted that unlike European countries that achieved constitutionalism through social evolution and the influential teachings of philosophers, a move towards constitutionalism in Ethiopia was introduced by Emperor Haile Selassie I. Using his traditional authority, the emperor granted modern constitutions to his

subjects: the first in 1931, and the second in 1955. The 1931 constitution created a bicameral parliament with the House of Senate whose members were appointed by the emperor himself, and the House of Deputies whose members were elected by the nobility. It created an executive branch of government with the emperor at the top of the executive with specified powers and prerogatives. It stipulated the rights and duties of the people, the powers of ministers and judges, and the budget of the government (Jembere, 1998, p. 169). Through the constitution, obedience to the law became a condition of relating with the state as an appointee, or an employee. Article 19 of the 1931 Constitution sets out the new rule of relationship between persons and ideas, or individuals and institutions based on the personification of the law. Article 19 declares that:

All Ethiopian subjects, provided they fulfil the conditions prescribed by the Law and by the decrees promulgated by His Majesty the Emperor, may be designated officers of the army or may be appointed to any other offices or posts in the service of the State ("Ethiopian Constitution of 1931 ").

The vocabularies used in the constitution to create new fields for the exercise of power were hitherto unknown in the country. Parliament, senate, chamber, ministers, executive, decree, and judiciary allowed the emergence of new sets of institutions that required new rules of inclusion and exclusion to office, based on new skills, beliefs, and experiences. The emperor became the Head of the Executive, the “fountain of justice”, the agent of change, the law-giver, the Commander-in-Chief, and the defender of the Orthodox Church (Jembere, 1998, p. 165). He maintained the power to decide on the organisation of the administration, the constitution of the army, the declaration of war, the signing of a treaty with foreign powers, the granting of titles of power, land, or pardon. Traditionally, most of these prerogatives were not new. However, what was new was their objectification by means of a written law. Like material objects, they were extracted from their traditional contexts, turned into appropriable or deniable goods, and became the exclusive holdings of the power of the emperor. This totalisation of power

created by the constitution became one of the most important aspects of transition from kingdom to Elitdom.

The constitution did not guarantee ways through which the nobility could share in the power of the government (Jembere, 1998, pp. 167-168). Conflict between members of the nobility and the King of Kings ensued that led to a compromise that resulted in the addition of a second part to the constitution. The addition recognised the rights and privileges of the nobility, especially their *rist gult* which is their granted land holdings (Jembere, 1998, p. 168). However, their independent authority was nevertheless construed by the unlimited power of the emperor (C. S. Clapham, 1969). In the constitutional document, under the signature of the emperor, a statement was included which reads:

We, bishops, princes, nobles, officials and scholars of Ethiopia have agreed to be bound by this constitution granted by Emperor Haile Selassie I. To clarify the first part, we have also reached agreement to the terms of these specific provisions (Wolde-Meskel, 1946 p. 58)

For the first time in the history of the country, the source of authority for leadership emanated from a written document. The symbolic significance of the document is very important as it moved the source of authority from society, from traditional relationships of obligation and belonging to the hands of elites at the pinnacle of power. It augured the coming of Elitdom, and the triumph of the letter, the written word, as an important means of claiming obedience, and administering society. By extracting authority and legitimacy from traditional sources, and putting them in the hands of the Emperor by means of a constitution, the central state became the sole justification not just for its function and power, but also for its own existence. Article 5 of the 1931 constitution declared the unconditional sanctity of the power of the emperor as:

By virtue of His Imperial Lineage as well as by the anointment he received, the person of the Emperor is sacred, His dignity

inviolable and His power incontestable. He therefore enjoys by right to all honors due him by tradition and in conformity with the present Constitution. The Law provides that whoever shall dare to harm the Majesty of the Emperor shall be punished (“Ethiopian Constitution 1931”).

This process of absolutizing power by removing it from its mitigating contexts in tradition was intensified by the second constitution in 1955. The second constitution was engendered by the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia (Jembere, 1998, p. 170). The drafting process took six years. Three American experts and three Ethiopian scholars were active in the process. The American constitution was its principal source. Jembere (1998) noted that important individual freedoms and rights of the US constitution such as *habeas corpus*; the prohibition of ex-post facto legislation; freedom of the press and assembly; protection against searches and seizures, and against the taking of property without compensation; the due process clause and the right to be confronted with witnesses; and assistance in obtaining witnesses were introduced. European Constitutions and Universal Declaration of Human Rights were also consulted.

The introduction of these greater constitutional guarantees should be seen hand in hand with the ever growing power of the Emperor. The 1955 constitution made the emperor a Head of State, a Head of Government, and the overseer of the justice through his crown Court which reviewed judgments given by the regular courts. In reality, the King of Kings was free to rule with more absolute power than any of his predecessors. The extent to which the constitution contained provisions that allowed greater freedoms and rights had little significance to ordinary people who had no access to the modern courts. The rights provided under the constitution and other legal regimes were basically grants from the Emperor; they were not part of the daily vocabulary of interaction among individuals; and, they did not become part of the living culture of the people (Beckstrom, 1973). The people hardly established their relationships through them or saw the laws as their absolute guarantors for the protection of their interests. Also, they seldom were able to exercise accountability over their leaders using the laws. However, the use of ideas new to the people to have normative legal and political power in the

society without the latters' active participation in the process allowed elites to lead the people into a process of domestication, a situation that increases the dependency of the people on elite institutions, and elite leadership, while alienating them from traditional relationships that had offered some customary protections. The reason for the lack of participation was not because the concepts of law and rights were alien to Ethiopians. Quite the contrary, several cases could be presented to show that in Ethiopia, there was a rich tradition that upheld law and justice as great ideals.

*Fitih Fitretawi*, which means natural justice, is a well-known concept in the traditional education system. The proverb 'a chicken lost without justice is more cause for concern than a mule gone fairly judged' expresses the acceptance of the significance of justice in the culture of the people (Jembere, 1998, p. 31). The tradition of the road side courts where disputing individuals would submit themselves to any passer-by on the street for arbitration is another example. The passer-by would hear both parties and give his judgment based on the common belief which says, "Justice is given by man according to his view and by God because He is all-knowing" (Jembere, 1998, p. 29). If one or both parties disagree with the judgment of the passer-by, the latter would tie the tip of the clothes of both parties, and refer them to the nearest authorities. The proverb, "the law ties together the shabby garment of the poor with the finest outfit of the rich" reflects the cultural basis of this tradition (Jembere, 1998, p. 30).

The presentation of law in a written form is not a new experience either. In 1450, King Zara Yacob ordered Orthodox Church scholars to prepare a written law. The church scholars submitted a draft which became a law under the name *Fewuse Menfesawi*, which means "spiritual remedy", or "canonical penances". The book had 62 articles but its application was limited to the reign of Zara Yacob, and it governed spiritual affairs more than secular ones. Another legal document that became influential in Ethiopia's legal history was the *Fetha Nagast* or Justice of Kings. According to Budge, the *Fitha Nagast* was initially drawn from various apostolic canons and laws and was translated from an Arabic text with "an Ethiopian flavour" (Budge, 1928, p. 568). Hence, it belongs to the interpretative and incorporative tradition of knowledge in the country. However, the new regimes of laws introduced since Haile Selassie did not consider the importance of these and other traditional laws.



Imitation was the principal mechanism by which the new laws were adopted. Following the constitution of 1955, six codes were issued. These include a civil code, a penal code, a commercial code, a maritime code, a civil procedure code, and a criminal procedure code. “These codes were all either drafted by foreign lawyers or inspired by foreign sources” (Vanderlinden, 1966-1967 p. 255). The case of the codification process of the 1960 civil code of Ethiopia, could give a good illustration. The Civil Code composed of five books with 3367 articles is the biggest body of law that regulates large areas of life in the country until today. Two actors took part in the codification process. They included an expert and a commissioner. The expert was a French jurist called Rene David who was commissioned to prepare a draft code for Ethiopia. The commission represented Ethiopian individuals elected to discuss the draft. According to Singer (1970), the expert brought European norms, and the commission brought the values of the ruling section of the Ethiopian Empire, making both unrealistic representatives of the values of the majority of Ethiopians. Moreover, the commission was more or less insignificant as it had “a role little more important than that of a translator” (Singer, 1970 p. 51). Commenting on the absence of interaction between the expert and the commission, Singer (1970 p. 50) argued that

The interaction between the expert and the Commission would obviously be crucial to the final working product. But here the expert was given a special status; though a member of the Commission, he was considered superior and did not work with the other commissioners, as one would have expected.

The outcome was a code “heavily influenced by the French model, and that all of the rules examined are products of a single (Western) legal culture, with a common core of categories and history” (Jembere, 1998, p. 163). Jembere (1998, p. 39) noted that “the customary law – so to speak, the ‘pure peoples’ law – was largely scrapped” by the following provision: “Unless otherwise expressly provided, all rules whether written or customary previously in force concerning matters provided for in this Code shall be replaced by this Code and are hereby repealed” (“Civil Code of Ethiopia, 1960, Negarit Gazzeta, Proclamation no. 165/1960, 19th Year no.

2.," Art. 3347, 1). The scrapping of traditional laws achieved by this provision was reported "unprecedented in Africa and, it seems, without recent precedent anywhere" (Krzeczunowiczi, 1963 p. 5).

Criticising the sweeping nature of the law, Brietzke (Brietzke, 1974, p. 155) observed that "David's inability to recognize custom as law contributes to the 'fantasy law' atmosphere of the Codes". He argued that this complete disregard of Ethiopian traditional laws and custom had a colonial character. By discarding the traditional and customary laws of the country, the new regime of laws disregarded the interest of the majority of Ethiopians and "served the interests of those who would preserve the *status quo* – the westernized, landed and urbanized elite" (Brietzke, 1974, p. 167).

### ***5.3.1. Absolutization and the decline of regional autonomy***

The process of intensifying centralisation by the use of legal and political instruments has been justified based on the promise of modernisation and development. In this subsection, I will briefly reflect on orthodox thinking about modernisation and its critics arguing that the ideology of modernisation and development supports elitdom by essentialising identities, bifurcating reality, and distorting historical meanings. The common assumption of development theory especially after the Cold War has been dominated by the perception of an inherent contradiction between modern and traditional cultures (Huntington, 1996). Modernisation was thought of in association with centralisation, urbanization and liberalization. The understanding of industrial development involved the perception of mechanised capital and intensive farming, polarising and shrinking rural life (Newby, 1980). However, orthodox thinking towards development has been challenged from the experience of both developed and underdeveloped countries (Chang, 2007; Sachs, 1992). Ottar Brox (2006) argued that Norway had demonstrated a greater advance through rural development without concentrating on urbanisation and centralisation. The divide between modernity and rurality is produced through discourses rather than essential differences behind each (Cruickshank, 2009). The process of development itself viewed in the Eurocentric diffusionist model has been challenged from historical and sociological, as well as factual and analytical grounds (Blaut, 1993). There is no single super-highway that leads

to progress. However, in third world countries including Ethiopia, the ideology of modernisation has been used to discredit the legacy of local traditions using the promise of an uncertain future.

The in-country diffusionist theory could be drawn between urban and rural life in places like Ethiopia. This theory is pregnant with two fundamental preconceptions. Firstly, development actors, such as peasants, teachers, students, workers, priests etc. are seen as bounded entities that assumed distinct positions within a predetermined social, economic or political space in the country. Then, the focus of development – be it educational, agricultural, or other – became the question of improving the performance or productivity of these entities. Secondly, relationships among these and other actors are conceived of as extensions of the self-interest of the entities concerned. The combination of these assumptions made the state to be viewed as another distinct entity with the power to regulate the activities of these entities using a set of defined rules. With centralisation, the assumption is that the strengthening of the power of the central state would facilitate the equitable diffusion of certain qualities from one entity to the other. For example, the current Ethiopian Education and Training Policy under Article 2 provides that one of the aims of educating students is to facilitate the “dissemination of science and technology in society”. The approach is embedded with a form of modular theory that considers a system’s activity as a form of interaction between and among specialised or distinct entities. Students and peasants are perceived as permanent recipients of knowledge from teachers and experts.

This diffusionist theory which is premised on the modularity of ‘individual’ members of society in a given country is a theoretical construction. Yet, the theory operates as though it were natural, true and self-evident simply because institutions are empowered by the state to ascribe fixed identities to individuals that belong to specific categories. For instance, in Lalibela, some of the students coming from rural areas are farmers at home. At other times, they are handicraftsmen who produce cultural artefacts for sale to tourists, or retailers of goods at the local market. This shows that the production of modern identities is primarily based on ideology than a fixed position or role in society.

The existence of rural and urban life alone cannot be contradictory without the work of elite power that aims at homogenising the diverse rural life into a single defenceless and manageable unit. In Ethiopia, centralisation was effected to serve the power interests of the powerful rather than the economic interests of the poor. Dessalegn Rahmato's ( 2009) inceptive study on rural Ethiopia supports this conclusion. He concluded,

I submit that the continuing hegemony of the state and the consequent subordination of the peasant is in large part a consequence of the rurality of the peasant world. By *rurality* I mean not just rural life, which is what immediately comes to mind, but also confinement to the rural world, not through an act of choice but because one is deprived of any other opportunities. Under Ethiopian circumstances, rurality means enduring poverty, voicelessness, and submission (Rahmato, 2009, p. 284).

Rahmato ( 2009) further argued that the improvement in infrastructure such as transportation and telecommunication since the 1970s in Ethiopia intensified the vulnerability of the rural people. The reason is that these developments enabled the “strong arm of the state” to reach and have control over their lives more than ever (Rahmato, 2009, p. 285).

The same argument could be extended to the relationship between urban and regional power centres. According to Clapham (1969, p. 35), the Ethiopian constitution had two purposes: centralisation and modernisation. Jembere (1998, p. 66) noted that “[t]he most important historical goal that the 1931 Constitution meant to achieve was to break down the powers of the regional lords, who gradually had become strong, so as to bring them under the powers of the centralised state machinery”. Furthermore, Shiferaw Bekele (1990, p. 296) argued that Ethiopian scholars have been “militant advocates of centralization”. “In fact they go to the extent of counterpoising the monarchy with the *mekwanent* (regional lords), the former seen as persistently fighting to strengthen the central institutions while the latter were persistently warring to strengthen their regional

powers”. Bekele (1990, p. 297) stressed that this analysis ignored the role of the central institutions which served as “adhesive forces” between the centre and the region. Only when regional centres of power are considered dubious to the national centre, and force is viewed as the sole means of obtaining obedience, the emergence of a singular centre that exercises direct control over the regions could be viewed as progressive. As noted by Bekele, the regional governors were as important as the central organs of the empire. The strength of the state was measured in terms of the strength of the relationship between the centre and the regions, not in terms of the dissolution of the power of the regions by the central government. Thus, what Ethiopian emperors wanted was the maintenance of strong ties with regional rulers, the strengthening of the traditional relationships of loyalty and mutual respect between the two, not the withdrawal or annexation of the power of the regions by the Emperor.

In order to strengthen the traditional relationship between the national and regional centres of power, a family relationship was often established between the royal families of the Emperor and the regional leaders. Moreover, regional lords were expected to participate in the central institutions of power as regional governors and royal counsellors. For a part of the year they were required to stay near the royal court and were “obliged to take part not only in royal councils, but also sit on royal tribunals and to participate in other activities of the King. Very often, they held court offices in addition to their provincial charges” (Bekele, 1990, p. 295). In the royal council, the most important decisions, such as measures against rebellion, were decided with the participation of the regional lords. Bekele (1990, p. 295) noted that “[p]rocedurally, the lords who attended a particular council would all give their opinion starting from the lowest official and going up one by one to the highest. The last to speak was the king whose words were final”. Allowing lower level officials to speak before their superiors enabled the former to express their views without knowing the view of higher officials. For the Emperor, it provided an opportunity to measure the level of support he could expect before passing a final decision. This suggests that Ethiopian emperors had no vested interest in destroying the power of the regional lords. Rather, they wanted to strengthen their traditional ties by allowing the latter to participate in the administration of the empire. This practice of recognising the importance of regional centres of power

as part and parcel of the empire coincided with the religious belief and cultural practice of the people.

As indicated in Chapters Three and Four, the Ethiopian tradition considered the existence of not just one but many centres of political and cultural life. The original Ark of the Covenant represented the grand central position in the empire. It is believed that it still exists at Axum Zion church, which is located at the seat of the earliest Ethiopian empire. In parallel to this, every Christian church that exists in the country must have a replica of the original Ark of the Covenant. The site of the Covenant, both the original and the replica, are considered central points in the social and cultural life of the community that surrounds them. Prayers, meetings, burial ceremonies, arbitrations, reconciliations, weddings, festivals, celebrations etc. take place around the church or under a nearby tree which is considered sacred. Here, what is important is that the replica in every church enjoys a great deal of reverence as the original Ark of the Covenant at Axum, highlighting the importance of place in Ethiopia.

In the same way, regional lords were important centres of power, and they assumed that position by virtue of their valid relationship with the grand central figure at the centre of the empire. By virtue of this relationship, they acquired the titles of *nigus*, which means King, and the emperor at the centre was called *Niguse Negest* which means King of Kings. Their function had no meaning without their relationship with the centre, and the emperor at the centre would not acquire the title of King of Kings without securing the recognition of the regional kings. At the centre, the King of Kings had no standing army. The army and revenue were raised by the regional Kings. Here, values such as trust and loyalty were important to maintain the relationship between the centre and the regions. That means, in the Ethiopian tradition, the centre and the regions were not meant to be oppositional forces that should be viewed in terms of the concept of Western dualism. However, as shown above, the absolutization of power under elitdom was the reverse of this process.

In conclusion, there is an aspect of the lawlessness of law, a situation where the law giver remains above the law by possessing its source, by becoming the originator of legal rules. This was clearly evident since the first constitution was issued in 1931. Despite the constitution, the Emperor “insisted upon the right to rule by decree, to

appoint and dismiss his ministers without reference to parliament, he could appoint members of the senate, judges, and even the mayors of municipalities” (Spencer, 1984 p. 257). Law as a license to lawlessness for the leader and a prohibition for the rest become a common phenomenon. In this situation, the sovereignty of the law giver lies in the vulnerability of the citizen, in the latter’s inability to find protection against the state. Being the only power that can violate the law without punishment, the leader becomes the only law unto itself, and its interest becomes the sole prohibition against its own action. Because the law is not inculcated in the traditional cultural life, however liberating the provisions it might have contained within it, it nevertheless remained superficial and exterior to daily life. Consequently, the achievement of centralisation by exercising the power to declare the law involved the process of liberating the law giver from limitations of traditional obligations that could otherwise have protected the people.

## **5.4. THE EMERGENCE OF THE IMITATIVE EDUCATION SYSTEM**

This section focuses on the role of imitative education for the consolidation of elitdom in Ethiopia. I follow historical and sociological interpretation of events, concepts and practices to show the rise of the western school that excluded Ethiopia’s traditional legacies. I will show that the development of western education in Ethiopia went hand in hand with transition from an ideology that viewed Ethiopia as a unique place in the world – Ethiocentrism– to an ideology that viewed Europe at the centre of the superioir power in the world– Eurocentrism. This transition will be presented under the background of two historical events, the battle of Adowa and the battle of Maychew. I will then show the development of the western school before and after the Italian occupation.

### ***5.4.1. The Tension between Ethiocentrism and Eurocentrism***

Following the occurrence of the historical event at Mekdela where Tewodros committed suicide and items in the Ethiopian national treasury were either looted or

burned by the British army, consciousness of power played a significant role in setting the relationship between Ethiopia and Europe. Ethiopian leaders had to constantly tradeoff between Ethiocentrism and Eurocentrism, between true loyalty to the Kebra Nagast, and acceptance of Western hegemony. Of course, Europe did not simply want Ethiopia to accept a world dominated by Eurocentrism. More importantly than that, it wanted to execute a colonial design over it. At the Berlin conference, and through the Tripartite Treaty, Europeans agreed to colonize Ethiopia by allotting parts of the country to specific colonial powers and spheres of influence. In a world dominated by military power, the search for knowledge was increasingly directed towards the search for sources of military power (Spring, 2006).

For Ethiopia, there was a clear contradiction between the sources of military power and national ideology. Ethiopians were interested in acquiring the arms of Europe in order to defend themselves against it. The hallmark of their diplomatic wisdom rested in maintaining the delicate balance between friendship and enmity with Europe. The various treaties concluded with European powers reflected some level of compromise between these conflicting interests. The downside of this venture was the inability to be effective on both sides. In the absence of equivalent negotiating power, one party has to compromise more than the other. While true independence required the rejection of dependency both ideologically and materially, true friendship required mutual trust and equivalent worth. The difficulty of maintaining this balance was exasperated due to the highest self regard both placed upon themselves.

While modern European thought espoused the idea that world history has one destiny or centre which is Europe, the Ethiopian ideology of the Kebra Nagast, on the other hand, challenged the subordination of the nation to any earthly power as Ethiopia is the chosen place of God destined to be free until the end of the world. Thus, it is possible to notice two fundamental and conflicting ideologies which could be expressed as Eurocentrism and Ethiocentrism. The tragedy of Ethiopian leaders, since the historical event at Mekdela, has been the belief that these two conflicting ideologies were relevant for the survival of the country as a modern and independent state. The decision taken by Empress Tayitu and Menelik II of Ethiopia to fight a European colonial power, and the battle of Adwa showed the climax of this contradiction.



Using the Italian version of the Treaty of Wuchale which was concluded in May 2, 1889 as a pretext, Italy tried to impose its colonial authority over Ethiopia. Realizing the cost of compromising the national sovereignty of the country, Emperor Menelik revoked the treaty and declared war against Italy. The war was fought “for the sake of faith and country”, through appeal to Ethiocentrism. The Emperor declared that all able bodied Ethiopians should follow him to the war front, and all disabled Ethiopians to pray for victory. Regional lords galvanized their forces, and priests carried a replica of the Ark of the Covenant to the war front. The consequence was that an African army of untrained peasants defeated a modern European Army at the battle of Adowa on 1 March 1896.

Following the victory at Adowa, Italy signed the Addis Ababa Treaty accepting the independence of Ethiopia, and agreed to pay war indemnity in exchange for prisoners of war. Moreover, most European powers rallied to start diplomatic relations with Ethiopia by opening embassies in Addis Ababa, and in 1926 Ethiopia became a member of the League of Nations. The development of this relationship with advanced countries created an irresistible attraction towards modernization, and the shortest way perceived to do so was through the imitation of the west. Especially since the period of Haile Selassie, Ethiopia started to dismantle or disregard the very traditional institutions that helped her maintain its independence, and started implanting Western institutions without the full participation of the people in whose name the institutions were imitated.

Forty years after the Battle of Adowa, Italy returned with full military might to erase the shameful scar it received at Adowa. At this time, Ethiopia was in a much better military position than it was forty years ago. There were a constitution and parliament, a more centralized state and educated bureaucracy, and a national army with better weapons than in 1896. Italy was also much better prepared and determined not just to win but also revenge the defeat at Adowa (Scott, 1978). One of the fiercest battles was fought at Maychew on 31 March, 1936 where Ethiopians were heavily defeated and the Emperor Haile Selassie left the country to appeal to the League of Nations. Italy then occupied Ethiopia for five years until the Emperor returned to his throne in 1941 with the support of the British army. The return of the Emperor with the support of a European power opened a renewed chapter when Ethiopia submitted to the institutional

and ideological supremacy and influence of the West. The modernization of the state or more strictly the modernization of the government along the lines of westernization was the typical feature of Ethiopia after the WWII. The most typical instance of this feature was the reform of the Ethiopian education system.

#### **5.4.2. *The emergence of Modern education***

The development of modern education in Ethiopia can be divided into two stages. The first stage took place from 1908 to 1935 when modern education started as a curious experiment towards Westernization and rapidly expanded during the period of Haile Selassie until the invasion by Italy. The second stage started with the occupation by Italy and encompasses the entire period since then since a complete Eurocentric education system has been implemented in the country. Three important actors could be identified in the early development of modern education in Ethiopia. These include the office of the emperor, western educated intellectuals, and western missionaries. During the first stage, the growth of the school was a gradual step by step process that reflected the dilemma between Ethiocentrism and Eurocentrism.

The first initiative to open a public school was implemented during the reign of Emperor Menelik II whose victory at Adowa opened up broader international diplomatic relationships with Europe. According to Wagaw (1990, p. 69), Ethiopian leaders felt acutely embarrassed as a result of a lack of expertise in foreign language, technology and diplomatic arts, and established a school “after the European model, independent of traditional education institutions”. At the initial stage, it is possible to argue that, Menelik II was not enthusiastic about replicating the European model of schooling in Ethiopia. Menelik’s idea of education focused on training translators and building on traditional skills. When the first initiative to open a school based on the European model was presented to him by the British educated *Hakim* Workineh Eshete, the Emperor, together with the Coptic Abuna Mattewos, who was the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, showed reluctance due to the perceived danger of exposing the mind of Ethiopian students to the religion of their foreign teachers. According to Bahru Zewde (2002, p. 23), “a compromise between tradition and innovation” was worked out by allowing only Coptic teachers to be in charge of the school. The outcome was the

opening of the first modern Ethiopian public school named after the emperor, in Addis Ababa, in 1908. The primary goal of education was to gain language and office experts who would serve the government in its international relationships and its “modern” institutions. This is clear from the subjects studied that at the beginning included French, English, math and drawing and “Later, Amharic, Italian, Arabic, Geography, history and sport were added to the syllabus” (Zewde, 2002, p. 24).

Further declarations issued by Menelik II emphasised the need to improve customary practices and the transfer of traditional skills from generation to generation. For example, in 1906 Menilik passed a proclamation declaring compulsory education for young persons (Wolde-Meskel, 1946 p. 600). Although implementation is difficult to ascertain, the declaration denounced the tradition that denigrated craftsmanship, and demanded that parents send their children to school from the age of six at the pain of losing the right to transfer their properties to their children when they die. It also provided that the government would prepare schools and appoint teachers. Later, a more strict declaration was issued in 1929 where parents were ordered to send their children or face a penalty of 50 birr. Parents were also ordered to choose a traditional skill and train their children so as to enable them earn a living. Failure to do so would cause a penalty of 50 birr (Wolde-Meskel, 1946 p. 601).

It is possible to see that this was a period of reforming tradition rather than abandoning it. Foreign education was desired without foreign ideology, especially religion. Here, Western achievement was regarded as a source of inspiration to upgrade and improve existing socio-political institutions. The Emperor saw the need to change traditionally stagnant practices while keeping intact the cultural elements that were perceived valuable to the political and cultural system. However, Western educated intellectuals felt that the emperor’s initiative was not enough.

The Ethiopian intellectuals who returned after completing higher education training from Western countries came up with a more radical approach towards education reform in the country. Zewde (2002) considers the Ethiopian intelligentsia starting from the period of Menelik II to the period before the Italian invasion as the first and second generations. The first generation of intellectuals obtained exposure to Western education through fortuitous means, or as protégés of Menelik II. Other

intellectuals obtained western education as self-educated individuals who created some form of relationship with missionaries in the country, or as graduates of Menelik II high school. Members of this group of intellectuals were concerned with modernisation. However, their recommendations towards it were far from being unanimous. For example, one of the protégés of Menelik II was the Italian educated Afework Gebreyesus who opposed the modernising role of tradition and advocated a colonial model of education in the country. Afework was later to serve the Italian government during the occupation, and was reappointed as ambassador by Haile Selassie after liberation. Another Russian educated scholar, Tekle Hawariyat Tekle Mariyam, recommended the importation of the Russian education system to Ethiopia. However, while the above group of intellectuals advocated a western model, there was another group called the self-educated intellectuals who had a stronger foundation in traditional education. These were graduates of the famous Raguel School who presented a strong attachment with the importance of Ethiopian values (Zewde, 2002, p. 23). As argued throughout this thesis, consciousness of power that favours western experiences played against the search for traditional sources of education.

The reform suggested by the western educated intellectuals was based on the superiority of the European model. However, there was an attempt to find innovative solutions to the contradiction posed between Eurocentrism and Ethiocentrism. One of the most advocated solutions in this regard was the recommendation to follow the example of Japan. Similarities such as Ethiopia's victory over Italy at Adowa in 1896 and Japan's victory over Russia in 1905, and the existence of an imperial tradition in both countries generated the passion to make Ethiopia the "Japan of Africa". Hence Japanisation was conceived as a living solution to the problem of transition from Feudalism to Capitalism (Zewde, 2002, p. 203). Gebre Hiwot Bayikedagne's recommendation illuminates the position of the intellectuals.

The task awaiting the present Ethiopian king is not like that of his predecessors. In the old days, Ignorance had held sway. Today, however, a strong and unassailable enemy called the European mind has risen against her. Whoever opens his door to her [i.e.,

European mind] prospers; whoever closes his door will be destroyed. If our Ethiopia accepts European mind, no one would dare attack her; if not, she will disintegrate and be enslaved. Hence, let us hope that His Highness Menelik's heir would examine and follow the example of Japanese government (Zewde, 2002, p. 206).

Here, Japanisation does not appear as a defence against Eurocentrism. If considered with Kebede's (2006) critical assessment of Bayikedagne's Eurocentric proclivities, the latter's proposal could be regarded simply as an attempt to persuade the Ethiopian king to adopt Westernisation. The Japanese government viewed Eurocentrism as a danger to the national culture and in 1890 issued the Imperial Rescript to implement the motto of Western skill but Japanese culture while Ethiopians had never thought of a cultural policy. Therefore, for Kebede, Japanisation failed because unlike their Japanese counterparts, Ethiopian leaders failed to generate interpretative power from their tradition and culture.

Zewde (2002) considered the cultural estrangement of the western educated students at the individual level but without presenting culture as the crucial point for Ethiopia's failure to modernise. Considering students sent to study abroad, he noted that unlike most Japanese students who studied technical skills, "Ethiopians preferred social studies" (Zewde, 2002, p. 79). This suggests that they were apt to make socio-cultural rather than techno-engineering inquiries. Moreover, he admits that many of them felt alienated from their society and had difficulties reintegrating themselves upon their return. However, according to Zewde (2008, p. 209), "the fundamental point that needs to be underlined by way of explaining why Ethiopia could not be the Japan of Africa is that, even before the Meiji restoration, Japan had attained a higher stage of social development than Ethiopia in the twentieth century". Here, one could question if a hierarchy of social development in a plane of universal time is difficult to imagine without the consideration of history from the perspective of Europe. Moreover, the largest emphasis that scholars put on the analysis of the role and experience of western educated individuals as a modernising social group leading the rest of the population

might have been a misplaced inquiry towards genuine progress. This later conjecture may lead to questioning the choice of social groups in the study of modernisation. For example, why do we consider intellectuals more than priests or farmers to explain progress in society?

Another important distinction was Japanese intellectuals, unlike their Ethiopian counterparts, promoted the belief in the uniqueness of Japan. *Nihonjinron* which literally means “discussions of the Japanese” refer to the vast array of “literature which thinking elites have produced to define the uniqueness of Japanese culture, society and national character” (Yoshino, 1992, p. 2). Japanese intellectuals, journalists, critics, writers and business elites fiercely competed against each other to disseminate *Nihonjinron* among the population. Television shows were used to intentionally promote Japanese nationalism using the concept of *Nihonjinron*. Between 1945 and 1978 more than 700 books were published with *Nihonjinron* as the title, many of which saw multiple reprints (Kazufumi & Befu, 1993). For example, Doi Takeo’s “The Anatomy of Dependence” was reprinted 13 times, and research shows that the popularity of *Nihonjinron* still continues to rise (Kazufumi & Befu, 1993). It is even ironic that Japanese elites used the Ark of the Covenant to promote Japanese nationalism more than Ethiopians were doing so based on the legend that the Ark of the Covenant was taken there.

This promotion of national uniqueness can be challenged, however, when uniqueness is constructed solely by considering external cultural threats rather than internal experience or dynamism. In Africa, Negritude is an intellectual construction of African elites designed for the purpose of combating the denigration of Western theories over the latter’s definition of African identities (Achebe, 1965). Inspired by the need to resist the negation of Africans, it has the merit of challenging Western theories at the intellectual level. However, it has little or no intellectual significance to become the basis of relevant education as it draws its ideological inertia from Western stereotypes of Africa rather than from the living culture of Africans. In the same way, in Japan, the celebration of Samurai culture in business has been criticised as a modern invention where a “loyal male subject of production is celebrated as a Samurai” (Hiroshi, 1995, p. 103). Hiroshi (1995) argued that, in this self-imposed colonial drama, Japan colonised itself and the Japanese played the role of the coloniser and the colonised. “From the

standpoint of consciousness such an operation might be repudiated as self-deception. If we see the whole cultural system as an organism, however, this operation can be thought of as a strategy for survival in a difficult environment” (Hiroshi, 1995, p. 107). In this sense, the Samurai tradition has helped to bridge the historical gap between modernisation and tradition, to represent the strength of the nation, and to confront the objectifying gaze of the western subject. Moreover, in light of the philosophy of Nihonjinron, the criticism of self-colonisation may strengthen the fundamental drive towards finding uniqueness from which the Japanese appear to have been deriving a great deal of resilience and energy. Uniqueness should be directed towards cultivating the life giving potential of a system that enables it to stand on its own feet, to be rooted in one’s place and to become an independent member of interacting systems in the world. Most of the Ethiopian elites, by contrast, were militant opponents of Ethiopia’s uniqueness and tradition.

The third group that played a significant role in shaping the country’s educational journey was Western missionaries. Without a large scale social interaction with the population, this group played a significant role through the influence they created in the life of one person, Teferi Mekonen, who later became Emperor Haile Selassie I. In Ethiopia, there are historical and ideological factors that inhibited the popularity of Catholic missionaries among the population. First, the Kebra Nagast considered that Rome or the Vatican had failed to keep the true faith in Christ. Second, Catholic missionaries in Ethiopia had been making consistent efforts to convert the Ethiopian state into Catholicism. Their success at converting King Susnyos caused devastating consequences to the country in 1622. As a result, “to this day in highland Ethiopia, the word Catholicism is associated with anti-Ethiopianism” (Wagaw, 1990, p. 71). Due to these factors, the missionaries focused on using their good relations with the leaders to spread their ideas rather than directly preaching to the people, especially in the northern part of the country.

Teferi Mekonen grew up in the south eastern part of the country, in Harar, and was tutored by French and Ethiopian Catholic priests. Wagaw (1990) mentioned an incident in the life of young Teferi that might have contributed towards the appointment of Catholic Jesuits to architect Ethiopia’s education system during Haile Selassie. He

wrote: “Indeed, one of the people [Teferi] fondly recalled was his teacher, *Aba Samuel*, a Catholic priest who lost his life while saving young Teferi’s life in a boating accident” (Wagaw, 1990, p. 71). This experience might have shaped the attitude of Teferi towards his future choice of a model of education for Ethiopia. Moreover, Teferi had a “semi-spiritual and semi-secular communion with Jarosseau”, the Catholic archbishop of Harar (Zewde, 2002, p. 174). In the correspondence between the two, that “Teferi kept the archbishop informed of practically all his actions and important events, is...vital in reconstructing the evolution of Tafari’s career” (Wagaw, 1990, p. 174). In addition, the experience of *Lij* Iyassu and Teferi at Menelik II School where the Coptic teachers applied strict discipline indiscriminate of social position might have contributed additional disenchantment to the young prince’s interest towards encouraging the influence of Orthodox religion in education (Zewde, 2002, p. 24). In any case, in 1925, Teferi himself opened the second school, Teferi Mekonen School where the French model of learning became predominant. From 1925 onwards, the French oriented Teferi Mekonen’s model of schooling expanded to various regions of the country. The interest was so intense that students were sponsored, meals provided, and even in some cases, like in Sidamo, students were detained throughout the year because it was feared that they may not come back to school after vacation (Zewde, 2002, p. 27). Missionary schools and community schools also expanded dramatically. Alliance Française with branches in Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa was important for training influential figures and for having strong ties with Teferi Mekonen School. The Swedish Evangelical School, the Greek, Armenian, Italian, Zionist, and American schools expanded. However, due to the prevalent Eurocentric view of the time, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was excluded from contributing to the expansion of modern education in the country.

What is clear from the above assessment is that, the Ethiopian education system that began in the early 20th century developed with the complete avoidance of the intellectual legacy of the country including its traditional education system. Instead of applying the interpretative tradition described in Chapter Four, the school served as a place of cultural indoctrination for the building of a new system of rule. The subjects studied, the methodology applied and the majority of the teachers employed were



unanimous in avoiding the Ethiopian tradition, especially the ideological belief in the Kebra Nagast and the intellectual legacy of the Orthodox Church. The school became the new intellectual birthplace for the Ethiopian ruling elite. This was especially evident throughout the long reign of Teferi - Haile Selassie who consistently expressed unwavering determination to modernize his country using western ideas, western experts, and institutions imitated from the West. This is the embryonic stage of elitism. Under the heavy shadow of consciousness of power, Eurocentric institutions emerged to pave the way for the coming of a new breed of leaders from the school.

#### ***5.4.3. The Post War Education Period***

The five years of Italian occupation brought a serious setback in the progress of the Western school. About two thirds of educated Ethiopians were killed by the fascist forces especially following the failed bombing attempt on the life of the Italian general Graziani in February 1937. After the Italian occupation in 1941, the role of missionaries became even more important in the development of higher education in the country. The Emperor invited Canadian Jesuits to rebuild the Teferi Mekonen School. The Jesuits led by Dr. Lucien Matte started their work in 1945, and in 1950 Matte was given a new task of organizing a two year higher education study program to prepare students for further studies abroad. The outcome was the establishment of the University College of Addis Ababa. A few months after the establishment of the college, Matte was sent to Europe and North America to recruit staff and purchase text books and other needed materials for the college (Wagaw, 1990).

The Emperor emphasized to the people the importance of education saying, “The salvation of our country, Ethiopia, as We have repeatedly stated to you, lies primarily in education” (Haile Selassie, 1967). However, if relevance was ever considered it was about the relevance of the new college to the educational standard of Britain, not to the condition of life in Ethiopia. Wagaw (1990, p. 73-74) explained that the preoccupation of the founders of the University College of Addis Ababa was to get international recognition through affiliation with the British University system. Due to the heavy administrative and financial implications that would be required by the University of London, the aspiration for affiliation was later abandoned. Through a

charter published in 28 July 1954, the University College of Addis Ababa was established. Another feature of the college was the predominance of social studies, which made it look like “an undergraduate liberal arts college” (Wagaw, 1990, p. 76). The various colleges established were modelled by the active involvement of foreign directors, advisors and teachers who had little information about the Ethiopian experience. For example, as the national economy and the people’s livelihood depend on agriculture, the importance of the field of agricultural studies is axiomatic. On 15 May 1952, a treaty to establish a College of Agriculture was signed with the United States. It was agreed that the United States would appoint the director of the fund for the college who would become its president fully empowered to decide on every aspect of the education system including “admission of students, establishment of curricula, conduct of examinations”, control of financial and other resources, “appointment and discharge of personnel, and all other administrative roles” (Wagaw, 1990, p. 80). The government of Ethiopia provided the land, and the United States government contracted Oklahoma State University which exercised “full control over the operation of the college” (Wagaw, 1990, p. 81).

The consultation for the preparation of opening a university started with the active involvement of the Jesuits when Dr. Matte’s consultation was eventually superseded by a powerful ally, the United States Government. Following the recommendation of a team of experts from the University of Utah, an agreement was signed with the US government for the establishment of a national university. The Emperor, who assumed the portfolio of the Minister of Education in 1941, became its first Chancellor. At the convocation ceremony held on 18 December 1961, the emperor addressed diplomats, ministers and faculty members, and students on the purpose of the University. It is striking to note that there was a significant rift between rhetoric and practice. The emperor spoke about the glory of the Ethiopian intellectual and cultural heritage and the need to build the future based on the legacy of the past. In his discourse, the purpose of university education was claimed to be for the cultural development of the people.

A fundamental objective of this University must be the safeguarding and developing of the culture of the people which it serves. This University is a product of that culture; it is the grouping together of those capable of understanding and using the accumulated heritage of the Ethiopian people. In this University, men and women will, working in association with one another, study the well-being of our culture, trace its development, and mold its future. That which enabled us today to open a university of such a standard is the wealth of literature and learning now extinct in the world which through hard work and perseverance our forefathers have preserved for us (Haile Selassie, quoted in Kebede, 2006, p. 15).

Kebede (2006) draws attention to the wide gap between rhetoric and practice. Practically, it is inconceivable to see how the people grouped together to work in the Haile Selassie I University were capable of contributing for the preservation and development of the accumulated heritage of the Ethiopian people. The teaching staffs were predominantly foreigners, and the curriculum they used was copied from other country's textbooks, and the medium of instruction applied was either English or French. Moreover, the basic ideological foundation of schooling was left to foreigners. By detaching education from the traditional ideology and the cultural values of the people in the name of secularizing it, the government actually enabled foreign religious groups to inculcate their own worldviews in the system. Historically and culturally, these groups have antagonistic perspectives towards Ethiocentrism. I have indicated above the case of Catholicism in the development of higher education despite the historical antagonism between Rome and Ethiopia. Another example worth mentioning is the role of Protestantism in mass education.

*Yemisirache Dimtse Litrary Campaign*, which means the 'Voice of the Gospel' literacy Campaign, started in 1962 under the Ethiopian Evangelical Church, Mekane Yesus (ECMY). The project was funded by the Lutheran World Federation. Through the Campaign, "more than half a million students had been involved up to 1975" (Sjostrom

& Sjoström, 1983, p. 45). The objectives of the campaign include teaching reading, writing, arithmetic, civic education and the promotion of socioeconomic changes. Despite these secular objectives of the campaign, the Evangelical Church had a clear spiritual motive for involving itself in secular activities in the country. The 1958 Constitution of the Church aimed at preserving and extending “the pure teaching of the Gospel” by activities such as “[t]he establishment and maintenance of educational, medical, and theological institutions directly or through affiliated councils” (Sjoström & Sjoström, 1983, p. 166). This aim of spreading religious beliefs using secular initiatives was clearly stipulated in the *Yemisirache Dimtse Literacy Campaign’s* Constitution. The purpose of the campaign was “[t]o win for Jesus Christ those who are without a saving knowledge of the Gospel”, and “[t]o deepen the spiritual life of existing believers” (Sjoström & Sjoström, 1983, p. 166).

It is difficult to measure the impact of the programme on the traditional worldview of the people. However, an evaluation conducted after a decade found that the church, despite its policy of tolerance to the imperial and the socialist regime, went even further to become part of the implementation apparatus of the state. Although it didn’t operate as a government department “[i]t can be argued, however, that ECMY serves the political power in an indirect way. ... ECMY sees it as a Christian duty to obey and cooperate with the secular powers as long as that is compatible with the Church’s creed” (Sjoström & Sjoström, 1983, p. 177).

This last observation suggests the attraction of Ethiopian leaders towards non-established religious groups that have strong ideological and resource backup from outside. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church made no significant initiatives to incorporate its ideologies into the secular systems although the Emperor had been its traditional guardian. In fact, attempts were made to “modernise” the church by establishing a college in line with Western theological foundations. The college was staffed with foreigners who taught subjects including Western philosophy in English to students who would become preachers of the Orthodox Church in Amharic. This is paradoxical when viewed in relation to the rich intellectual heritage of the Orthodox Church which has been the centre and source of spiritual interpretation and meaning for centuries.

Nevertheless, it illustrates the expansion of the Eurocentric view of the world through every system, new or old, since the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Ethiopia.

It should be admitted that there were non-Ethiopian scholars who made significant contributions to Ethiopia's academic life. As far as the development of education policy is concerned, a good example was Ernest Work, an American education expert employed by the emperor to study and recommend on an appropriate model of an educational system for Ethiopia. Work had travelled to many parts of Africa and observed how education had been used to impose the European hegemony on colonized people, and was anxious to avoid a similar fate on Ethiopia.

From all sides I was asked what sort of an education system I proposed to suggest – they hoped it would be French or Italian or English, depending upon the one asking. They often suggested it would be American since I came from America. My answer was always that so far as I was concerned it should be neither French, Italian, English, nor American. That I hoped it could be Ethiopian (Work, 1934).

Work's first recommendation was that the national language, Amharic, with proper simplification and enrichment of its alphabet, numerals, and words, should be used as a medium of instruction. Secondly, the content of learning should be Ethiopian. He criticized that the content of text books was full of

[p]ages about France and Napoleon; Italy and Garibaldi; England and Gladstone but almost nothing about Ethiopia and Menelik and His Majesty their most worthy Emperor. This should not be. Ethiopian boys and girls should be educated in their own language, learn about their own country and men and interesting things, as well as the world in general (Work, 1934, p. 67).

Third, Ethiopians should be trained primarily by Ethiopian teachers. To this end, “one of the most pressing and urgent needs is the establishment of the foundation of a University of Ethiopia – the first department of which should be a teachers’ training school” (Work, 1934, p. 67). Here, Work suggested that, at the beginning, American teachers are best suited to train the future of Ethiopian teachers as Americans are disinterested in “European grabbing rivalry in African land” (Work, 1934, p. 67). Finally, he recommended an educational program with fields of study relevant to the country. He suggested six years of elementary studies for all Ethiopians; followed by specialized school training with agriculture, home making, trade and industry; then five to six years further training for those who wish to pursue a business and professional life and finally a university training of their choice for those who passed through the above and still endeavour to study more. Work’s recommendation was significantly important to Ethiopianize the education system. He submitted his recommendations but the only suggestion that gained the heed of the Ethiopian government was the recommendation to involve Americans in the founding of a university. The Emperor gave permission and support for the establishment of the University of Haile Selassie I under the management of the Americans (Caulk, 1975).

The above historical examination focused on showing the inherent rift between Ethiopian tradition and Ethiopian education. Starting from its inception, education was separated, even antagonized with tradition. The main reason for this, as explained above, is the ideological commitment of the architects of modern education. They did not take the national ideology and the intellectual legacy of the country seriously. In the way that the colonial structure that transformed the natives’ mind was established in Africa by western missionaries and colonial masters (Mudimbe, 1988), in Ethiopia as well, similar structures were built by western missionaries who were supported by native leaders. Under the heavy influence of consciousness of power, institutions were imitated from the west to create the system of elitdom. The consequence of this tragic development was to be manifested in the activities of the products of the education system, i. e., the Ethiopian students, which is the main focus of the next chapter.

## 5.5. CONCLUSION

The chapter showed the unfolding of massive change in Ethiopian society since the period of Tewodros II. As Joseph Tubiana (1965, p. 164) observed, “The death of Emperor Theodoros [Tewodros] in 1868 marks the end of an important period, a period when Ethiopia could dispense with giving attention to the policy of the European Powers”. This study considered the suicide of Tewodros and the burning and looting of Ethiopian intellectual objects at Mekdela as a historical event that marked the birth of consciousness of power towards the west. This consciousness gained its ideological and institutional makeup through the creation of imitated institutions and structures from the west. The occurrence of various historical events, especially the consequence of Italian invasion in 1935, and the influence of western countries that aided the restoration of Haile Selassie after WWII played a significant role in the process of westernisation. In any case, the establishment of alien rules and institutions without major conflict and resistance within Ethiopia shows the consequence of consciousness of power that developed since the historical event at Mekdela in 1868. Further events increased this consciousness.

The establishment of the first public western school occurred in 1908, and a system of power based on European ideals and traditions started to gain momentum through the progressive displacement of the traditional beliefs and cultural legacies of the people. The imitation of western laws was carried out with utter disregard of the established customary and traditional laws of the country. This process became robust, especially after the end of the Italian occupation, when Emperor Haile Selassie allowed the creation of institutions and laws using foreign experts without sufficient regard to their relevance to the Ethiopian tradition and society. What the above developments underscore is consciousness of power facilitates the irrelevancy of tradition to modernisation as it projects the west as an essential model of progress. In this context, the Ethiopian higher education institutions were created with complete dependence on western institutions and experts, and the question of the relevance of the imitated education system to the tradition of the country was not considered as an important question. Like anywhere else in colonized Africa, western missionaries and western scholars became the intellectual “fathers” of the Ethiopian education system.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE RISE AND FALL OF STUDENT MESSIANISM

*What the Ethiopian revolution actually entailed was countless repeated uprooting of social relations, in thousands of local communities, in millions of lives*  
(Donham, 1999, p. 35)

#### 6.1. INTRODUCTION

In the previous two chapters, I followed historical event analysis to highlight how consciousness of power facilitated the development of western institutions in Ethiopia. During the period of Haile Selassie, the ideological and institutional foundations for “modernisation” were put in place, and a system of elitdom eventually took over the rule of the kingdom. This chapter focuses on the consolidation of elitdom through western knowledge, messianism, and violence. The first section focuses on how western knowledge imparted antagonistic dualism as the basis for the construction of students’ perception of social roles and identity in contrast to their tradition and society. Students who acquired western knowledge saw themselves as missionaries of reform who endeavoured to guide their society in accordance with western theoretical blue-prints. This approach is regarded as missionarism. The second section focuses on how students expressed their role as agents of radical change through political activism and participation in mass education campaigns. This process is regarded as messianism. It involves a strong belief in a single accurate path towards progress, and the necessity to take radical action in order to realize it. Through messianism and to a lesser extent missionarism, the students of 1960s and 1970s became the masterminds of the Ethiopian revolution that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie I from power on 12 September, 1974. The third section will show how the state used violence to crush the messianic role of the students in order to assert itself as the centre of national life. The outcome of these three processes, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, was the suppression of tradition as a basis of organising social and political relationships within the country and the consolidation of elitdom as the embodiment of knowledge and



power driven by political intolerance, suppression of dissent, and monopoly over national resources.

## **6.2. MISSIONARISM AS AN EFFECT OF WESTERN KNOWLEDGE**

In the previous chapter, I analysed how historical events in Ethiopia brought about change through the development of wider consciousness, and how change becomes enduring given the deployment of power to that effect. However, consciousness of power that leads to change does not emerge only from historical events. Knowledge is a key factor in terms of supplying information for new ways of looking at oneself and the world. The coming of western knowledge in Africa brought with it new types of teachers who refer to the history, tradition, and experience of Europeans to educate Africans (Mudimbe, 1994). Similar to other African countries, in Ethiopia western missionaries were authorised to establish and manage the Ethiopian higher education system. As the content and method of teaching was imitated from the west, the education system produced a type of identity presented here as missionarism.

The goal of the missionary is a converted life, a life that has given up hope in everything that the converted have known locally. An example of missionarism could be drawn from the activity of Belgian missionaries in the Congo from which Mudimbe (1994) drew three conversion stages. First there is a “referential symbol”. The referential symbol “speaks in the name of political power and absolute truth”. Second, there is a speech that communicates this with an “edifying style”. Although it may refer to a political or religious truth, it “ascribes itself into a style, which makes the speech specific, seducing, and thus spells out its power”. Third, there is a process of alienation “where the convert, individually a ‘child,’ assumes the identity of a style imposed upon him or her to the point of displaying it as his or her true nature” (Mudimbe, 1994, p. 109)

In the case of the Congo, the referential symbol who speaks in the name of absolute truth can be identified with the existence of a coloniser, or a Belgian missionary in that country. However, in Ethiopia, as presented in the previous chapter, the founders

of the Ethiopian modern school which included western missionaries, western educated Ethiopians, and the politicians, established the “modern” school as a referential symbol of western power. By imitating the content, style, language, and administration of the western model, the school facilitated what Kebede called the “belated colonisation of Ethiopia” (Kebede, 2008a, p. 45). Thus, the identity of missionarism could be regarded as a style of knowledge that was obtained from the school, which imparts an identity upon students, a style that the converted considered was “an expression of his or her true nature” (Mudimbe, 1994, p. 109). Through missionarism, students, despite their age and experience, which according to tradition would make them only ineligible to social leadership, become “change agents” who would be sent out as colonial missionaries to free the population from the bondage of backward customs.

The above approach considers missionarism as a socio-cultural practice inherited from the role of western missionaries, and is transformed into belief in the leadership qualities of western educated intellectuals to change the backwardness of their country (Richardson, 1988). This belief confers upon students not just the position of intellectual superiority in society but more importantly it leads them to internalize an identity of being a missionary of change. Western educated Ethiopians are considered as intellectual missionaries, and the Ethiopian tradition is regarded as the primordial field for the execution of their mission.

Missionarism involves the acquisition of a wide range of ideas from the western school in the country. These ideas create impressions and opinions that are forwarded to interpret the social, economic and political life of the country. Although every idea of missionarism cannot be regarded antithetical to the Ethiopian tradition, there are important ways through which it contributes to the dissipation of tradition. First, due to the western content of the curriculum, foreign teachers, and the use of English as a medium of instruction, students obtain superficial knowledge about the history of their country and the concern of their people. This lack of accurate and deep knowledge about their country and society reduces the opportunity to make education a concerted effort to utilise tradition as an engine of progress.

Second, western knowledge has the epistemological drive towards the bifurcation of reality into opposite polarities. It divides the social world between urban

and rural, modern and traditional, literate and illiterate, intellectual and ignorant etc. This process of antagonistic bifurcation is essential for the creation of the identity of the student as a missionary whose role is to help the local people ‘jump’ from the second to the first set of categories. This role entails the educated individual as an autonomous source of meaning whose intellectual authority is free from validation and censorship by the standards of tradition. Here, antagonistic bifurcation should be separated from the mere apprehension of dual characteristics in a given reality.

As expressed in Chapter Three, the Ethiopian conception of dualism precludes absolute separation between opposite categories. Instead, it emphasizes the existence of a central position towards which the opposite qualities of good and evil could be mediated and reconciled. However, antagonistic dualism presupposes the existence of an individual whose function requires the existence of opposite qualities in any given reality. As a value oriented approach, the worth of a given reality, or an aspect of it, is determined in relation to the individual’s interest in or value of the subject matter concerned. The individual draws opposite attributes from a given reality and determines what action should be taken to enforce the favoured quality over the disfavoured ones. The magnitude of the seriousness of the action one may take in a context defined through antagonistic bifurcation depends on the level of contradiction one draws between the opposite coordinates of the perceived reality.

Third, antagonistic bifurcation starts as a social practice in the school where education is usually understood as a composite of dual persons, i.e., the teacher and the student. These two persons represent two unequal cultures, i.e., Europe and Ethiopia. There is a parallel perception of authority and power that mediates the relationship between the teacher and the student. As can be inferred from the tacit recognition of social roles by students and teachers, the teacher teaches, evaluates, corrects, advises and the student subjects him/herself to the lectures, evaluations and orders of the teacher. Knowledge and ignorance are constructed on opposite spaces occupying the respective minds of the teacher and the students. Knowledge is understood as coming from the west, and through the teaching process revealing, not itself but the backwardness of traditions. Its significance is valued through the devaluation of local traditions, and its meaning became nothing more than what tradition is not.

Fourth, missionaryism undermines the accountability of the individual to the values and beliefs of the people. Ethiopian traditional scholars such as monks and *dabtaras* enjoyed enormous respect from the people not only due to their knowledge but also due to their character (Kaplan, 1984). In order to maintain their status as leaders of the people, they had to distribute the privilege that their status had brought them through service and voluntary renouncement of pleasure and comfort. In other words, their status depended on the continuation of their devotion to the cause of spiritual life; they had to be found worthy of being privileged. Missionaryism undermines the social accountability of the intellectual to the moral expectation of the people.

Western educated Ethiopians gained the privilege and status of being the learned leaders of the people primarily from the state. They were given offices to decide on important societal issues, and state institutions and dignitaries expressed the significance of their education to the country's future. Unlike the traditional scholars, their personal lifestyle and character became irrelevant to the traditional precepts of the people. They could accumulate the privilege of being a learned person, in terms of social position and material reward, without the responsibility to distribute it according to the traditional expectations of the people. The state that provides them their education and work could dismiss them or promote them depending on whether they continued to serve its interests or not. Thus, missionaryism is characterised by a disconnection between the character of the educated and the traditional values of the place they belonged to. It rendered the traditional relationship between authority and responsibility dysfunctional. The traditional privilege of gaining status in order to serve the people changed to the modern privilege of gaining reward in order to serve the state. This in turn made the state an entity less dependent on the traditional relationships between the leaders and the people. The traditional networks and tributaries of power that nurtured the existence and functioning of the state were replaced by normative laws to which the educated become agents of implementation.

These points show the general effects of western knowledge as expressed through the identity of missionaryism among Ethiopian students. Missionaryism accommodates the possibilities of reforming existing traditions using western

knowledge. However, it could also make the mind receptive to a more radical approach against tradition. The radicalized version of missionarism is regarded as messianism.

### **6.3. STUDENT MESSIANISM**

Messianism is a radicalised version of missionarism that incorporates an urgent desire and commitment to change existing systems. It is motivated by a vision of a just society and the reality of unjust rule. Dissatisfaction with social, economic and political conditions, and the desire to change them, requires not just the removal of existing systems but also an idea of a substitution. The substitution, however abstract and vague, should nevertheless create a burning desire to move into the imagined future. Eric Hoffer's (1951) true believers are determined to bring change not because they despise what existed and feel empowered to destroy it, but because they have a fanatical faith in a holy cause that lies ahead. Once an "extravagant hope" is preached, Hoffer argued, "The hopeful can draw strength from the most ridiculous sources of power – a slogan, a word, a button" (Hoffer, 1951, p. 9).

Ethiopian students of the 1960s enacted a new identity that made them passionate missionaries of change because they believed in an idea of a substitution, which was socialism. Their idea of socialism was propagated by a group of radicalized students who called themselves the Crocodile Society (Zewde, 2010, p. 14). But, how did the discourse of a small group gain a tremendous amount of support among students? Why is radicalism perceived as a chosen path towards political change?

Student activism in Ethiopia took place under a political context where dissent has been harshly repressed. During Haile Selassie, when the government imitated the laws and systems of the West, the students formed their own institutions to develop and express their opinions. They created student publications, student unions, debating societies, and various clubs and associations based on the ideas they obtained throughout their stay at the school. Their political activism of messianism can be seen based on two stages.

The first stage is the selective imitation of western ideas that are antagonistic to local unjust conditions. This involves appropriating terms from imported ideologies to name political actors and activities in the country. Through the study of their lessons,

peer and group interaction, students appropriated words that expressed radical political ideas. For instance, Ethiopian students and several scholars borrowed from Marxist and liberal thought words such as “feudalism” and “class” to conceptualize the Ethiopian traditional political and economic system before 1974 (Crummey, 1980). They also appropriated from the same sources words and concepts to antagonize the political differences that they had with each other. For instance, almost all political parties that were active during the 1970s claimed they were Marxists-Leninists. Reading from a single source, citing from same philosophers, newly formed parties waged violent clashes against each other and remained divided to the end. Ottaway’s (1978) observation of the post 1974 debate between the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party, and the All Ethiopians Socialist Party is an illustrative example. The former called the latter traitors, and the latter called the former anarchists. Ethiopian political figures of the past hardly became sources of inspiration for the activism of the students. Instead, names such as Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara, V.I. Lenin, and Mao Zedong became eternal heroes. The political leaders of the past were portrayed as mere “reactionaries”, or “feudal lords who used to suck the blood of the poor”, not as “founding fathers” or guardians of Ethiopia’s independence except when such reference would benefit the propaganda of the political elites. Alem Kebede (2010 p. 311-312) noted that the intellectuals applied “retroactive” framing to reframe the past and the present, and “projective” framing to portray a blissful forthcoming in the future.

The messianic role of the students was expressed through radical political ideas and activities that aimed at removing the government from power. The first student protest against authority occurred when university students participated in the *coup d’état* of 1960 against Haile Selassie, at a time when “they neither knew what a *coup d’état* was or how to mount a demonstration” (Balsvik, 2007, p. 11). They drew a manifesto which asserted that Ethiopia’s backwardness was due to the refusal of the government to allow the “newly educated to modernise the country”. Accordingly, “The manifesto placed the students and their successors at the epicentre of Ethiopian politics” (Balsvik, 2007, p. 12). Later, through what is commonly known as the Ethiopian Student Movement, students became the intellectual leaders of the 1974 revolution that removed Haile Selassie from power. Wagaw (1990, p. 203) noted that had it not been for the

political activism of the Ethiopian students, the revolution would not have occurred in 1974.

Following the removal of Haile Selassie from power, new structures and actors came to the spotlight of national politics. As Sewell (1996, p. 861) noted, a historical event is characterised by “dislocations and transformative rearticulations of structures” which occur with the reconstruction of the country’s political culture accompanied by the shifting of resources and power from the monarchy to the new regime. In this process, students were more advanced than the military that seized political power under the name Derg.

The Derg is the common name used to represent the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army that ruled over the country from 1974 to 1987. Although it had no political programme of its own, it adopted the popular slogans of the students such as ‘Land to the Tiller’ and others (Kebede, 2003b, p. 179-180). The Derg used three complementary projects to consolidate elitdom. These include campaign, organisation, and violence. Campaign was intended to spread the message of the revolution to the majority of the people with the aim of gaining the best possible support from the population. Organisation was a project of incorporating the people into specific power positions within the new system by inventing new modes of relationships or networks of power. The use of violence was intended to crystallise the new power relationship created through the two processes by eliminating actual and suspected threats to the regime. Students were active participants as protestors, campaigners, organisers, and later became victims of the political change they initiated. The perpetration of violence radically ruptured not just the traditional modes of relationships people had with each other, but also the possibility of establishing a new stable centre of relationships. Here it is important to analyse two historical events that led to the consolidation of the consciousness of power regarding the messianic role of both the students and the state. First, I will present historical event that accentuated the messianic role of the students through participation in campaigns. Second, I will present the red-terror as a turning point that put the state in the position as the only messianic institution in the country.

### **6.3.1. Campaign**

One of the common justifications about the value of education is change. Through the Millennium Development Goals, Universal Primary Education has been hailed as a universal human right and a development prerequisite to change the condition of impoverished societies (MDGs). In Africa, the colonial administrators and Western missionaries expanded primary education among their subjects and converts. Bertrand Russel (2004, p. 158) argued that universal education was initiated due to the feeling that “an ignorant population is a disgrace to a civilised life”. “The feeling that illiteracy was disgraceful” entails a cultural initiative (Russel, 2004, p. 158). In Ethiopia, since the advent of modernisation in the 20th century, the rural population have been considered illiterate. The definition of illiteracy is not simply the inability to write and read. The term depicts the entire mode of life in the rural area as primitive. The initiative against illiteracy has been considered the most venerated act often lodged in the form of literacy campaigns.

During my field work, I met teachers who were participants in the literacy campaign during the previous government. They believe that the campaign against illiteracy was one of the best achievements of Derg. They even consider that it was the best lesson that the current government should have considered of repeating it. They are genuinely concerned by the unwillingness of graduates to work in rural areas:

These days’ students are not willing to go to the rural areas to teach the people. How can our country develop unless intellectuals go to the people and teach them how to read and write? The world is globalizing but our people are still living in the Stone Age because we could not carry out our historic responsibilities (Interview, 26 April, 2012).

Their common perception of progress suggests a linear pathway of technological advancement where those at the front lead those behind. This theory presupposes the existence of a higher moral and cultural standard among the developed western societies, and places the destiny of the led in the vision of the leaders. The theory works at the



local place by putting the urban and schooled ahead of the rural peasants. The perception of rural life as backward is the most taken for granted belief. “Rural people are backward because they are poor and uneducated, that is as clear as day light” (Interview, 28 April, 2012). All traditional beliefs about nature and society not referenced from the texts of the students’ books, or supported by the urban culture are considered irrational. A university student gave me a clear example of how students view themselves in relation to their people:

We are the eyes of the people. A blind person, irrespective of age or knowledge needs an eyed person to lead him the way. In Ethiopia, we have a proverb which says, ‘if the blind leads the blind, both would fall into a ditch’. Therefore, only the educated who have the sight of knowledge should lead the people, who are blind due to long years of illiteracy and backwardness (Interview, 22 April, 2012).

This general sense of missionarism students feel towards their society was operationalized in various messianic initiatives that were undertaken in social, cultural, and political fields during the Derg regime. Their initiative to teach literacy and numeracy to the rural population through a “warlike” campaign, and their effort to discourage aspects of traditional beliefs and practices, as well as their instrumental role in reorganising the rural population along socialist lines reflect the internalisation of the messianic identity. Akilu Habte (2010) reflecting on the spirit of the Ethiopian Student Movement remembered that

The students thought they knew everything. They thought they knew... how to run a government, how to teach at a university, how to be a president of a university, a minister of education, an administrator. They knew it all. The consequence was disaster.

The teaching and reorganising of the rural population was animated by a cultural reengineering that supported the consolidation of elitdom while undermining the traditional relationships and values of the population. Two campaigns could be taken as an example to show the relationship between teaching literacy and the strengthening of elitdom. These are *Yemisirache Dimtse Literacy Campaign*, and *Zemecha*, the Development through Cooperation, Enlightenment and Work Campaign.

The first campaign was not a messianic initiative of the students but set a precedent for the messianic campaign to follow. Voice of the Gospel started in 1962 under the Ethiopian Evangelical Church, Mekane Eyesus (ECMY). The project was funded by the Lutheran World Federation. In this campaign, “more than half a million students had been involved up to 1975” (Sjostrom & Sjostrome, 1983, p. 45). The objectives of the campaign include teaching reading, writing, arithmetic, civic education and promotion of socioeconomic changes. Despite these secular objectives of the campaign, the Evangelical Church that runs it has a clear spiritual mission and attitudinal changes have been observed through the evaluation of the project a decade after its completion. The evaluation noted that the church, despite its policy of tolerance to the imperial and the socialist regime, went even further to become part of the implementation apparatus of the state. Although it didn’t operate as a government department “[i]t can be argued, however, that ECMY serves the political power in an indirect way. ... ECMY sees it as a Christian duty to obey and cooperate with the secular powers as long as that is compatible with the Church’s creed” (Sjostrom & Sjostrome, 1983, p. xx). The second initiative, *Zemecha*, was the most important initiative.

Milkias noted that the word “*Zemecha* means war mobilization against the enemy; a total mobilization against a total enemy. It implies total commitment and participation and ends by total success or failure” (Milkias, 1980, p. 54). Immediately after the removal of Haile Selassie from power, the students requested that the government interrupt their classes and be sent out to the countryside to teach the rural people about the revolution. The students were organised, given uniforms, and sent to the rural population as army crusaders or torch bearers to spread the news of the revolution and bring enlightenment and civilisation to the broad masses of the rural

people. The situation of the rural people was presented as “life behind the dark curtains of illiteracy and in the chain of poverty” (Milkias, 1980, p. 77). Kebede likens this military oriented program as a “colonial enterprise” (Kebede, 2008a, p. 91). About 6,000 university students and teachers, with about 50,000 secondary school students were sent out to 437 rural places to liberate the masses from oppressive ideas and prepare them to embrace the philosophy of ‘*Ethiopia Tikdem*’, which means “Ethiopia First”. For the government this motto aimed at “removing elements of traditional political identity, such as adherence to Orthodox Christianity, which prevented it from serving as a fully national symbol” (Clapham, 1989, p. 12). The students were to teach self-confidence, self-reliance, dignity of labour, and moral regeneration. They were also to explain to the people that “the millennium-old Ethiopian feudal tradition of drunkenness, debauchery, overindulgence, partiality and dishonesty are characteristics of decadence” (Milkias, 1980, p. 55). Another objective was to “[c]ollect and document national folklore and promote the study of regional cultures” (Milkias, 1980, p. 55). However, this latter objective was effectively undermined by authorities who were not interested in it. Asgedom (2007) noted that this denied the gathering of a possible bank of traditional ideas that could have been saved for succeeding generations.

The Zemecha was accompanied with various slogans that reflect the students’ messianic position and passion to participate in healing the nation from the ravages of hunger and “enable the people to stand on their own feet” (Milkias, 1980, p. 55). Some of the slogans were:

We pledge to eradicate illiteracy by teaching and learning!

Let the educated teach and the uneducated learn!

Age is no barrier to education!

Literacy is part and parcel of the Cultural Revolution!

The curtain of ignorance will be torn asunder!

Although there was a great deal of mobilisation, as it were the students themselves who requested to interrupt their classes and be sent out to the rural people to teach, the Derg took the opportunity later and turned the voluntary request of the

students into a law. The Zemecha was promulgated in the official newspaper of the government as an obligatory mission of all educated Ethiopians with severe sanctions attached against those who might defect from fulfilling their responsibilities. The proclamation provided:

Any person who is obligated to participate in the campaign shall as long as he fails to fulfil his campaign obligation, not be permitted; (1) to attend day or night school in Ethiopia; (2) to be employed in any government or private organisation; and (3) to leave Ethiopia whatsoever (Negarit Gazeta, 1977, p. 44).

The proclamation shows that the government expropriated the messianic position of the students. It twisted the long awaited agitation of students to play a decisive role in the life of their people to serve its own purpose. The obvious motive was to diffuse political opposition against its ambition to stay in power. But, the new campaign law had various social and cultural repercussions. High school children from the age of sixteen and above were declared teachers in a cultural context where teachers are viewed as leaders. The students became civilisers, opinion makers and advisors to the rural population. What is significant at this stage is again the purpose for which law was used to intensify government control over life. By appropriating the slogan of the students and subjecting their initiative to the terms and conditions of its law, the Derg appropriated the process, purpose, and outcome of their movement. It claimed ownership over it, and ultimately took whatever credit could come out of the campaign while assigning letdowns to the “immaturity” of the students. The ultimate end of the campaign was the subjection of both the students and the rural people to its power, the exercise of authority to execute programmes in the name of the people thereby domesticating the people with its presence and desire to stay in power.

The proclamation states that those who attended modern schools are obligated to be the teachers, civilisers, and leaders of the people without which their status as citizens would be revoked. They cannot be students, or employees, or even migrants without undertaking that role. Although the campaign was initially for one year, it was extended

by another year in 1975 (Milkias, 1980). In the field, the campaigners were to teach the people who their enemies were, to assist in the confiscation of land from traditional landlords, and to organise the people for land distribution. The two most important objectives that might have induced students to execute the Zemecha were their zeal to realise their long awaited slogan “land to the tiller”, and a commitment for the establishment of civilian government that would replace the Provisional Military Committee (Derg). While the former objective was more or less realised, the second led to their utter frustration.

The proclamation that declared the leadership of the students could be considered reductionist to the culture of the people. The measure of advancement, of right and wrong, was bent to the comprehension of the students who believed in their own role as revellers of a new knowledge. Traditional beliefs and practices were regarded only through shallow materialism that rejected some aspects of the spiritual and cultural life of the people as irrational and superstitious. The role of the students served to institutionalise the radical and ongoing negation of traditions that became the moral justification of the socialist philosophy that the military government claimed to follow.

During the Zemecha, the students took with themselves a vague idea of Marxism-Leninism with a highly antagonistic and bifurcating language. It was noted that “...students carrying Mao’s little red book, would lecture peasants on class struggle and the necessity of collective farming, while the peasant association leaders kept asking where they would get the oxen urgently needed for plowing and when fertilizer would be delivered” (Donham, 1999, p. 12).

One of the most bifurcating concepts that students introduced into the rural areas was the division between classes. They introduced a polarised and irreconcilable opposition between the majority of the peasants as oppressed, and their traditional leaders of the old system, often known as *balabat* and *chiqa shum*, as the oppressors. This class division was amorphous, contextually irrelevant, and largely incomprehensible to the people. Farming retainers, blacksmiths and labourers were often categorised as belonging to the class of the oppressed. The class of the oppressors, on the other hand, contained not just the political appointees of the old system, but any one exercising some form of political or cultural authority in the community, such as

traditional chiefs, or persons referred to as sorcerers and witches. According to Donham, who was conducting Ethnographic study at Malee, Southern Ethiopia at that time, “[b]elief in caste, to the students, was not just a superstition, it was anti-revolutionary” (Donham, 1999, p. 50). The students characterised the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed as being exploitative, immoral, and counter revolutionary. People were told to recognise one another either as comrades or enemies. Once a strict dichotomy was drawn between the former leaders and the rest, and the relationship between the two was defined as one of constant confrontation and struggle, the remedy suggested by the Zemecha was “the victory of the oppressed over the grave of the oppressors” (Interview, 13 May, 2012). It was reported that through their teachings the students would incite the people to take every measure against their oppressors. According to Donham (1999, p. 46) the students would ask the people who their real enemies were, and proceed to give the answer.

Your real enemies are the kati and the goda [these were the Malee words that the local Christian translator used for the Zemecha students’ Amharic reference to *balabat and chika shum*]. If they try to take money from you, you catch them and bring them to the police. If they resist, then kill them.

Balsvik (2007) also noted that the students participated in the confiscation of grain from former leaders and its distribution to the people. In their bid to convert the people to the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, the students found crusading allies from protestant missionaries especially in the South. Balsvik reported that (2007, p. 63) “the students and the protestant Christians could in particular put up a united front of condemnation and disregard towards the traditional world view of the local people, which upheld local chiefs”.

An example of such a denigrating attitude towards local belief was reflected in Keffa, southern Ethiopia where *Zemacha* students tried to demonstrate the “reactionary” practice of a local spiritual leader. Once they entered his secluded compound and feasted by the followers of the *geramanja*, “the students deliberately desecrated the *geramanja*’s

sacred eating utensils and, after dinner, seated the low-caste *manjo* on his special horse”. The outraged followers of the *geramanja* waited until the students had assembled in a school building in the neighbourhood. The building was surrounded and put to torch. According to reports, which could not be cross-checked, all the students died in the blaze or were shot as they fled (Donham, 1999).

Such opposition to the acts of the students was not common. In many places, the students acted against tradition with impunity. It should be stressed, though, that the action of the students was not motivated by total disrespect to the people’s beliefs. The students believed they were liberating the people from the incarcerating effect of superstitious beliefs and from the exploitation of their produce by witchcraft and sorcerers. They were attempting to enlighten them to take their own destiny into their own hands, not to rely on anything, even on God, but on the revolution that would lead them to communism, to the true heaven on earth. Thus, it is possible to consider the action of the students as a religious mission (Kebede, 2008a). As Habte (2010) noted, in Ethiopia, Marxism Leninism was presented “almost as a religion... If you had a different idea you are the enemy”. De Waal (1991, p. 321) noted that people were “forced at gunpoint to attend literacy classes and public meetings” in order to change their culture to socialism and to separate them from their religious beliefs. Through the materialist philosophy of Marxism-Leninism, the traditional conception of faith and hope hitherto viewed as emanating from religion is now transformed into the unfolding actualities of the present; it was reduced from the flight of utopian imagination of religious beliefs into the walking feet of history.

Two conclusions could be drawn from the campaign. First, it laid down a rule that reverberated to the remote corners of the country. That rule was the acceptance of Western educated elites as the new leaders of the people; and, by virtue of its power to educate and give office to the learned; the government indirectly presented itself as the moral, spiritual, and cultural centre of the people. Second, it introduced an institutionalised bifurcated view of the social world to the rural population using antagonistic terms such as feudals versus tenants, reactionaries versus revolutionaries and oppressors and oppressed. The institutionalisation of this division was intensified through what was known as the organisation of the masses.

### 6.3.2. *Organisation*

Besides teaching the masses about Marxism-Leninism, the organisation of the masses was another important role carried out by the students. The new system was able to plant its roots deep into the soils of the rural villages by using the students to organise the population. The most important units of organisation were the *kebeles*. As local administrative units constituting villages or neighbours in a proximate geographical area, the *kebeles* played a key role of providing an institutional setup to the government at the rural and urban areas. Once established, *kebeles* were made to create Association of Rural Dwellers in the rural areas, and Association of Urban Dwellers in urban areas. They also established workers', women's, and youth's associations. The rural Keble associations became instrumental in carrying out the various programmes of the government including the distribution of land and the implementation of a villagization program where scattered homesteads were made to form larger villages. They also executed the resettlement programmes of the Derg where poor or landless farmers were forced to settle on regions with sparse population density often inhospitable and remote from public services, and recruited individuals for national military service. The dramatic increase in the participation of the population in the policies of the government was implemented through the *kebeles*. However, the recruitment of the *kebeles*' leaders was imposed from above with 'rubber-stamping participation' (Tiruneh, 1993, p. 12). Although the students were not direct participants in the activities of the *kebeles*, they took part in organising them and teaching their ideologies to them.

The *kebeles* served the most important role of consolidating and sustaining the regime. Another function of the *kebeles* was their role in increasing the capacity of the government to extract revenue, and control the economy. The *kebeles* were able to collect taxes, and impose quotas of grains upon the farmers to be sold at fixed prices to the government. The principles with which the *kebeles* carried out their functions were influenced by the ideology of the state that rejects the cultural and religious practices and beliefs of the people (Clapham, 1989, p 7-8). This made *kebeles* part of the building blocks of Elitdom and by detaching leadership from the common precepts of the people they severed the social and cultural basis of political relationships.



One of the main organising principles of the government was blind obedience, according to the nomenclature of the Derg, Revolutionary-Centrism (*abiyotawi maekelwinet*). Opposition to authority was considered a serious contempt against the spirit of the revolution. As an elementary student, I remember the time when we were recruited by *Kebele* officials to practice singing and marching to “celebrate” the anniversary of the dethronement of Haile Selassie. The preparation took place at a local *kebele* hall, and it was always preceded with lectures about Marxism-Leninism, an idea that was incomprehensible to me and my friends. In the small town where I grew up, the view of party officials was the most dramatic and fearful event of all. I have a memory of the District Workers Party Secretariat and his followers, in their tight khaki uniforms, walking along the roads guarded by armed militia. For my friends and I, fear was the only means by which we could relate to those officials.

More than the actions, the process through which the kebeles implemented their actions defined the nature of politics for the majority. Corruption was rampant and poor individuals were subjected to forced recruitment to the military. Those who had some level of family ties were able to pay the *kebele* officials and save their relatives and/or produce. New codes of relationships were established as people made every effort to survive. “With the expansion of state power after the revolution, giving gifts to revolutionary officials had been extended on a scale unknown under Haile Selassie. Such gifts were more than illicit transactions: They constituted obedience and obeisance to the revolution” (Donham, 1999, p. xxiii).

People did not know if it was possible to trust anyone, to believe in anything, their moral codes, their sacred customs, generally their way of life was revoked without any sensible replacement. What follows was a blind acceptance of everything that was handed down from the authorities.

This shows that the creation and organisation of local structures through the active participation of Ethiopian students facilitated conditions for the government to invalidate and exclude the sanctity of tradition, and replace it with a system through

which elite power could be exercised at the local level using all measures including violence.

#### **6.4. POLITICS THROUGH VERBAL AND PHYSICAL VIOLENCE**

The single most important factor that seriously impacted the Ethiopian perception of politics was the practice of state violence against the civilian population. Mbembe (2001) noted that the post-colonial state in Africa is marked by the institutionalisation of violence. This is also true in Ethiopia, a country that cannot be called a post-colonial state due to the absence of an accepted foreign rule in its history. Like the colonial period, government institutions served to implement some form of violence by the state. The violence had its own stage, morbid methods of performance, and effect that made it enduring in the consciousness of people.

We can see two modes of expression for violence: verbal and physical. Initially, there was what was called verbal violence where the traditional art of *eset ageba*, a form of litigation conducted between parties by the use of metaphors, poems, proverbs, etc was changed by fierce debate among intellectuals that included naked insults between contending parties and debating from radical positions drawn from the same Marxist-Leninist ideology. The expression of insult as a form of violence was practiced initially by the students. Through their radical publications and speeches, university students used to insult Haile Selassie's officials as thieves, ticks, pigs etc. Irrespective of its cause, the use of such language by young children against their superiors in age was a clear violation of tradition. It also negated the principle of wisdom as humility. The insult against authority reached its peak when the students cried "Thief! Thief! Thief!" against Haile Selassie when he was moved by the military from the palace to his place of arrest in a Volkswagen without a single gunshot fired by the military (Whitman, 1975).

Reflecting on the dishonouring of the emperor by his own students and later his murder by his own soldiers, Abbink (1995, p. 140) noted that,

If one would pursue a psychoanalytic approach to the problem, one might say that the removal and killing of Haile Selassie in August 1975 was a typical case of “father killing”, the result of which were visited on the “children” later.

The vocabulary of insult used to draw and characterise opposing views was instrumental for the development of numerous slogans and banners under which the most egregious form of physical violence in the history of the country was committed. The verbal violence that consumed the debate of the students at the beginning of the 1970s paved the way for the physical violence that occurred around the end of the period (Zewde, 2008, p. 433).

It is also argued that the verbal violence, the debate, and action of the students played a decisive role for the radicalisation of the government itself. ‘Doctrinal consistency’ was regarded as the most important expression of commitment to the cause of the revolution (Kebede, 2008a, p. 3). As mentioned above, some students supported the Derg hoping that its takeover of power from the emperor was temporary. However, the military show no sign of handing over its power. While the students were executing the campaign in rural places, the Derg was consolidating its grip on power. A division then emerged among the students themselves. Those who wanted the immediate establishment of a civilian government came together under the more intellectually dominant party called the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP). Those who wanted to give the military more time were organised under the party All Ethiopians Socialist Movement which is commonly called Meison. Both parties comprised the most educated in the country, and became fierce enemies who later ended up being victims of the Red Terror that consumed the lives of at least 10,000 educated people in the capital alone (De Waal, 1991, p. 101).

#### **6.4.1. *The Red Terror***

The Red Terror was a Derg sponsored killing of political activists, the majority of whom were students suspected of opposing the military government. It can be

regarded as an act in which student messianism was replaced by state messianism. Zewde (2008, p 435-440) divided the Red Terror into three stages which I draw upon for the analysis. The first stage was between September 1976 and February 1977. During this period, EPRP members started to assassinate key government figures and supporters. The government retaliated by killing some EPRP members, and generally gave justification to the public why the measures had to be taken. The second stage was between February and November 1977. The crucial trigger was the coup attempt against the Chairman of the Derg, Mengistu Hailemariam, on 3 February, 1977. This period was characterised by search and kill missions (Zewde, 2008). On 17 April 1977, Mengistu appeared at a televised public rally with three bottles allegedly filled with blood. It was said that the three bottles represented the three enemies of the revolution: feudalism, imperialism, and bureaucratic-imperialism. He smashed the bottles on the stage showing to the people that the blood of the reactionaries would be spilled on the streets of the country. The next day, the government newspaper came out with the title, "The Broad Masses of Ethiopia: Your Revolution has been transformed from a Defensive to an Offensive Position" (Addis Zemen, 1977). It was at this stage that the kebeles and the organised associations that were initially organised through the support of student campaigners made a blood pact with the regime. 'Revolutionary squads' were recruited from the mass associations of peasants, urban dwellers, and factory workers under the program "the arming of the broad masses" (Tiruneh, 1993, p. 208). In addition to the squads, cadres were selected from the military and from political factions that reported to Mengistu. The squads and the cadres were coordinated by a highly trained security force directly commanded from the palace by Mengistu himself. These forces, which according to Tiruneh, were the "machinery of death" which selected, tortured, and killed prominent individuals while encouraging the squads and the cadres to do the same. The peak of the killings during this period occurred on May 1, 1977.

Ethiopian political parties used International Workers Day as an opportunity to showcase their political stands. On April 29, 1977, EPRP organised a mass rally that led to a disaster. On that day, and throughout half of the month, more than 1000 demonstrators were massacred by government militias, half on the streets and the rest while fleeing or hiding.

School children of eleven years of age and above were at the forefront of EPRP demonstrations. It is widely reported that hospitals often refused to treat the wounded on the grounds that they were reactionaries, and charged anything up to 100 US dollars and 25 US dollars for the release of students' and workers' bodies, respectively, to cover the cost of bullets wasted in killing them (Tiruneh, 1993, p. 211)

What made the period of red-terror such a gruesome event is not just the severity and brutality of the violence but also the involvement of ordinary persons in the act. Rural kebeles' and association's offices were turned into detention centres where the most despicable acts of torture were committed against suspected members and sympathisers of EPRP. "One typical form of torture was soaking the feet of the detainees in boiling water for a time and then suspending them upside-down and beating the soles of their feet until the skin gave way to blood and the raw flesh and finally to the bare bones" (Tiruneh, 1993, p. 212). These torture techniques were largely learned from Soviet and Cuban advisors of the government (Tiruneh, 1993). Many died in the process; others became disabled physically or mentally. The objective of the torture was to force the victims to expose at least three members of the EPRP to the authorities. Out of the severity of the pain, many of them had to incriminate themselves, or innocent persons whom they remembered, or even members of the security forces.

Once the so called members of EPRP were identified through the process of torture and forced incrimination, they would be taken to the outskirts of the cities and executed at day break with gunshots.

Their skulls were smashed open with gun butts, their brains and blood scattered all around and slogans pinned to their bodies, the corpses would be left lying on strategic street corners till morning for passer-by to see; sometimes corpses were also displayed on television. With this morbid ritual over, the bodies were then

collected and buried in mass graves on the outskirts of the cities  
(Tiruneh, 1993, p 212-213).

The third stage of the Red Terror took place between November 1977 and May 1978. This time was the period of “*netsa ermija*” which means “unrestricted licence to kill” (Zewde, 2010, p. 439). Terror became a normal duty of revolutionary squads who were authorised to take revolutionary measures against enemies of the revolution. More organised and determined than ever, the Derg expanded the practice of terror. At this stage, the members of Meison who supported the illumination of EPRP during the first and second stage of the red-terror themselves became victims of the Derg. By doing so, the government eliminated all organised groups, especially politically active students and graduates, slashing the moral and intellectual pedigree of political leadership to its own size.

Zewde (2010, p. 442) presented two important consequences that resulted from the violent crushing of EPRP and Meison. The first effect was that Mengistu Hailemariam became the centre of national life.

After eliminating all of the leftist groupings except his own, *Abiwotawi Saddam* (“Revolutionary Fire”), he declared himself the *ma’ikel* (centre) around whom the genuine vanguard party was to be formed...In truth, he became the *ma’ikel*, not only of the party but also of national life in general.

As presented in the previous two chapters, this is against the Ethiopian tradition that considered Covenant as the central intersection point for the vertical and horizontal axes of national life. As a consequence of the Red Terror, “a generation of urban people with at least a minimum education” was lost (De Waal, 1991, p. 110). As Mengistu occupied the national centre, his opponents looked for new centres to organise and challenge the regime. What followed was the decline of multi-nationalist movements and the rise of ethno-nationalist movements among which the current leading coalition of ethnic political parties, Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF),

became the strongest. Like the Derg, political parties are oriented by Marxist-Leninist elitism and view the political and cultural legacy of the past through the prism of ethnic oppression and backwardness (Kebede, 2003a).

Ethiopia was made and remade for the third time in less than half a century. Before 1974, Haile Selassie was viewed as standing at the centre of the nation; and before 1991, Mengistu Hailemariam became a national centre, and then since before 2012 Meles Zenawi has been at the centre of political life. Their style and legacy may not be one and the same. However, their significance as centers of ultimate political power is undeniable. It can be argued that Ethiopia's tragic experience during modern times has been the ascendancy of *one-man-centred* politics backed by western ideas and instruments of power with little or no regard to the role of indigenous traditions. One-man-centred politics entails over-reliance on the power of an individual to deal with all national problems. It has to do with the exaltation of the whim of an individual or group of individuals whose decisions are dictated by their own or their group's power interests than the cultural and traditional sensibilities of the population. Although one-man-centred politics may not be new to the country, it became progressively strong since the period of Haile Selassie when the emperor decided to import western ideas, institutions, experts and instruments of coercion to build a new nation in exclusion of the traditional legacy of the country.

#### **6.4.2. *Lessons of Violence***

There are three important points that emerged out of the Red Terror. The first comes from the identity of the perpetrators and the victims; the second is the process through which terror was executed and the third is the impact of the violence on society—on the government in general and on students in particular. As stated above, although organised and led by the military, civilians were active participants in the Red Terror. Urban and rural dwellers, workers, professionals, and students organised under various associations were drowned by the current of the revolution to form death squads in order to eliminate other civilians suspected of being “counter revolutionary”. Large number of hitherto denigrated individuals came to the political scene for the first time as actors to

write a story that ultimately was to define who they were as members of a new political community.

The process through which acts of terror was committed revoked some of the fundamental beliefs that ordinary persons had regarding the sanctity of life in their tradition. For example, the violation of burial to the victims was a fundamental blow to the traditional ceremony that must have been kept for the dead. Such a ceremony allowed strong community involvement as almost every individual belongs to a burial association called “*edir*”. Through *edir* associations, the dead are mourned in a range of prolonged burial ceremonies such as prayers and remembrance feasts which are important to every family. The common Ethiopian proverb “*kebarie atasatagne*” which means “may I not be in a position where no one would attend my funeral” suggests the sanctity of this ritual. However, what was done to the victims of Red Terror was a flagrant violation of this tradition.

Another impact was the bifurcation of social and political reality in terms of antagonistic forces. The Ethiopian social, political and historical world was perceived as a field of struggle between the uncompromising agents of good and bad political forces. Based on this radicalised view of dissent, a culture of verbal violence and confrontation consumed any political dialogue in the country. This was clearly visible in the 2005 national election where political parties underwent a furious political debate that resulted in the killing of dozens of civilians and the arrest of several political activists (Abbink, 2006).

## **6.5. CONCLUSION**

In the previous chapter it was shown that the modern school was created as an institution that supplies western epistemology. The latter constantly bifurcates social reality into contradictory opposites making the possibility of having a social and political centre complex. In this process, what is considered as Ethiopia’s tradition has been relegated to a state of backwardness that opposes modern progress. Students, despite their tender age and experience, which according to tradition would make them only ineligible to social leadership, became ‘change agents’ who would be sent out as colonial missionaries to free the population from the bondage of backward customs. I



used two terms, missionaryism and messianism to express the top-down pre-emptive initiative of the students to change their society

Both missionaryism and messianism share the command condition of separation from tradition (analysed as alienation in Chapter Seven). In both cases, tradition is to a large extent considered as the opposite of modernisation. However, while missionaryism considers the achievement of change through the progressive reformation and reformulation of the physical and mental spaces of the people, messianism aims at achieving change through radical political action, including violence against anything that opposes its vision. Ethiopian students were driven towards the latter approach due to their vision to materialise socialism and their dissatisfaction with the then existing traditional system. They produced the slogan, the motto, and the radical action that they believed was needed to be taken to change the country into a socialist nation. They participated in literacy campaigns and spread the “news” of socialism and helped create grassroots rural and urban associations.

This role was later confiscated by the military rulers who took violent measures first against the old system and later against the students alleged to have been involved in oppositional activities. The Red Terror is a clear example that shows the end result of radical messianism. The state, by virtue of its monopolistic control over the instruments of coercion, became the only effective messianic institution in the country. The process by which the power of elites has unfolded – antagonistic bifurcation, student and state messianism, and violence – led to the progressive invalidation of traditional *values* that helped individuals to maintain stable social *relationships* in the country. The next chapter will explore this condition as centredlessness.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **CENTREDLESSNESS: CURRENT EDUCATION POLICY AND ALIENATION**

#### **7.1. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter deals with the present education system in Ethiopia that came into effect in 1991 after the current government seized power through armed conflict against Derg rule. The major policy framework that has become the basis of this education system is the Education and Training Policy (ETP). It was enacted by the Ministry of Education in 1994, and is still operational in the country at the time of undertaking the research for this thesis. Since this chapter focuses on current Ethiopian education policy and practice, the arguments put forward in this chapter are largely drawn from the two sets of ethnographic fieldwork and the interviews with research participants conducted in Ethiopia. Thus, unlike the prior chapters, the primary sources are rich ethnographic field notes and interviews.

The chapter is organised into three main sections. The first section focuses on a critical analysis of the ETP providing an historical overview of the time in which the ETP emerges and then moves to draw out the following themes including: the ETP's major policy directions, the use of English as a medium of instruction, the question of quality education, and education for work and the faith in technology. The second section analyses student identities in relation to perceptions of tradition and modernity. The third section focuses on alienation and centredlessness. With a brief revision of the literature on alienation, it analyses common challenges being faced by students and introduces centredlessness as a crucial aspect of alienation that explains their condition.

## **7.2. BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ETP**

This section provides a brief historical background for the development of the current educational system in Ethiopia. In the previous chapter, it was shown that the consciousness of power created through the western education system contributed to the rise of student missionarism and messianism especially since the 1960s. The education system supplied the perception that educated elites were responsible for ‘rescuing’ the people from the bondage of tradition. In the process of attempting to realise this messianic belief, students initiated radical opposition that led to the fall of Haile Selassie from power in 1974, and paid enormous sacrifices to rescue power from the military takeover, especially during the *red-terror* (Chege, 1979). After removing Haile Selassie, the military, under the name Derg, established a Marxist-Leninist education system. Schools became centres of party mobilisation: students had to study ‘revolutionary’ songs, attend Marxist-Leninist classes, and were subjected to forced recruitment for national military services. Questions of academic freedom and other political freedoms were taboo. Political party offices were opened in the campuses exercising effective control over the teaching – learning process. Members of the academic community became participants by adopting the nomenclature of the political system, and labelling dissenters as “anarchists”, “anti-revolutionaries”, “imperialists” etc. (Ottaway, 1978, p. 19). Consequently, political mobilisation based on nationalistic ideals was subjected to severe scrutiny and criticism leading to the emergence of ethnic based liberation fronts, especially from Eritrea and Tigray at that time.

In the two regions, while the Eritrean Peoples’ Liberation Front (EPLF) fought to secede from Ethiopia, the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) organised other members from different ethnic groups to form ethnic based parties of their own, and later come together under a single multi-ethnic party called the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). After 17 years of civil war, EPRDF defeated the Derg and seized political power in 1991. The change of power from the Derg to EPRDF constituted a historical event since it was followed by a series of developments of national significance.

With the EPRDF in power, two developments became significant. The first one was the emergence of ethnic origin as an important source of individual and group identity (Young, 1996). Soon after independence, EPRDF recognised Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia, and introduced a new constitution in 1994. The constitution under Article 8 declared the sovereignty of "Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia" who aspired to achieve a "common destiny" "by rectifying historically unjust relationships". It divided the country into nine ethnic regions, recognised the right of nations and nationalities to promote their own identities and to exercise their right to self-determination up to secession (FDRE, 1995, Art.34). The constitution recognised not individuals but the various ethno-linguistic members as the makers of the nation (Nahum, 1997, pp. 51-52). The second point is agriculture. The government introduced what is known as Agricultural Development-Led Industrialisation (ADLI) to give more emphasis to rural household agricultural development than urban industries. Using the two policy discourses the state claimed to have established itself at the centre of traditional and cultural life of the people. Like the Ethiopian Student Movement's slogan of "Land to the Tiller", these two strategies presented the life of the rural population as a field of moral and practical engagement for state messianism in Ethiopia. In order to understand how ethnic identity and agricultural economy were abstracted from culture, from their local meaning and significance, to formulate the policy discourse of elitdom, one has to look into how tradition is conceptualised in state policies and operationalized in the system that specifically governs these areas. Nevertheless, these two areas are related to the concern of this section as the consideration of the ETP is an important indicator of whether or not the state affirms tradition as an expression of the people's rights.

### **7.3. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ETHIOPIAN EDUCATION AND TRAINING POLICY**

The traditional education system aimed at using education to enlighten the individual with divine truth and make him/her one with society. Knowledge was considered as a "live coal buried under the ashes of a stove", a treasure only God can

reveal to humans (Wagaw, 1990, p. 38). To seek knowledge was to seek for truth. Hence, education was an end; it was desired for its own sake. Similar to the classical education in Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, knowledge was to be pursued through the study of sacred texts and the practice of spiritual life (Spring, 2006, p. 2). Education was not designed to cultivate or benefit the individual directly; rather, the individual had to carry the “cross” along the torturous road to the Calvary of true knowledge. Ethiopian metaphors like “a knowledgeable person is righteous” (*yawoke yetsedeke*) and “may an educated person kill me” (*yetemare yigidelegne*) suggest that sanctity was an attribute of knowledge and an educated person was harmless. Hence, education focused on ethical principles, discouraged individualistic tendencies and promoted relational ideals over self-serving ones. What has happened under modernism is the opposite of this process.

Under modernism, the origin of knowledge is reduced to experience based on human sense perception (Brent, 1983). Education is desired not just to fulfill the human interest to know but more importantly to fulfil his/her material interests. This led to the rise of instrumental reason in knowledge production where education is viewed as a means rather than an end (Hon-Man, 1999). How to address human interest, however, varied over the ages. With the rise of nationalism, education policies aimed at producing citizens who would safeguard the national interest (Spring, 2004 p. 2). With the triumph of neoliberal globalisation, education was redesigned to facilitate the integration of national economies with the global market (Torres, 2009).

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Education and Training Policy (MOE, 1994) which is the basic policy framework for education at the time of writing, reflects the above modernist views of education. The ETP prescribes that education has to be secular and the Ethiopian curriculum has to become “up to international standard”. The policy directs that English is to be taught as a subject from year one, and as a medium of instruction in high schools and universities. It allows individuals and various organisations to produce, supply and distribute educational materials, open schools, and establish training programs.

The policy creates an educational hierarchy from elementary schooling through the university level. At the lowest level: kindergarten would prepare the child for formal

schooling and at a primary level, the child would learn “literacy, numeracy, environment, agriculture, crafts, home science, health services and civics” for eight years. The purpose of primary education is “to prepare students for further general education and training” using their local languages and lasts for eight years (MOE, 2011). The use of local language or “mother tongue” is deemed necessary based on “pedagogical advantages” and the constitutional rights of nations/nationalities to promote their ethnic languages (MOE, 2011). At this stage, English would be offered as a subject in primary schools. Once the students complete primary level education, English becomes the medium of instruction for the rest of their academic life.

The next stage, General Secondary School, lasts two years in which grade 10 students take the Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate Examination. Students who score less than required may go to Technical and Vocational Training (TVT), while those who passed join the Preparatory Secondary School which is a two year preparatory education for university level studies. This policy has been operational for more than two decades now. However, its ideological assumptions and relevance to Ethiopian life has hardly been questioned.

The introduction provides a definition for education as, “a process by which man transmits his experiences, new findings, and values accumulated over the years, in his struggle for survival and development, through generations” (MOE, 1994). This definition links knowledge and education to the survival ethos of the body, and diminishes the space of recognition for spiritual and aesthetic forms of knowledge. Under its objectives, policy provides the purpose of education with semantic action verbs such as: “to produce”, “to cultivate”, “to develop”, “to bring up”, “to provide”, “to make”, “to create”, “to ensure” and “to diffuse”— suggesting the view of education that produces ‘citizens’ rather than the other way round. Loaded more with political than educational objectives, the approach augers the revival of the messianic identity of the Ethiopian Student Movement that envisioned the life of the Ethiopian peasantry as the natural field of its intellectual engagement. Knowledge is defined as a good that can be stored in, and distributed from the premises of the modern school to the mass population. This diffusionist vision of knowledge resembles the “coloniser’s model of the world” (Blaut, 1993). According to Blaut, diffusionism is a myth that considers the

west or Europe as a self-generating source for the dissemination of scientific ideas. “In this view, modernity is still a one-way street, or perhaps better, a multi-lane superhighway with only entry ramps” (Clifford, 2004, p. 3). In order to construct such a development superhighway that would swiftly take the country to the level of middle income economies, the policy links western knowledge with state power, and presents three justifications for its subject-creating roles.

First, it historicises the past. It makes no positive reference to the history or culture of the people. Instead, it portrays the past as a legacy of “complex problems the country has plunged in by dictatorial, self-centred and vain regimes” (MOE, 1994, p. 4). Moreover, while it remembers the existence of illiteracy, harmful traditional practices and primitivism that continues to resist the diffusion of science and technology, it makes no positive references to the country’s history. Second, it historicises the subject. It makes Ethiopian students casualties of the history and the culture of the past as it intends to operate at their cognitive level to reformulate their mental spaces: to make them “differentiate harmful practices from useful ones,... show positive attitude towards development and dissemination of science and technology”, and to make them “citizens with a humane outlook” (MOE, 1994, p 7-8). Third, it intends to perform these functions at the individual level. It aims to “[c]ultivate the cognitive, creative and productive potential of citizens”, and “[d]evelop the ...problem solving capacity of individuals” (MOE, 1994, p. 7). Based on Western dualism, this approach invents antagonistic identities in education and awards moral and intellectual superiority to the teacher and the educated as agents of western civilisation. It implies that the school has the power to give a “humane outlook”— the ability to differentiate the harmful from the useful to a society that was plunged into complex problems due to the vain regimes of the past and the vagaries of ignorance and illiteracy (MOE, 1994, p. 6.)

Such a reductionist approach to the legacy of tradition portrays a Hegelian view of motionless Africa, a land of childish immaturity that existed “beyond a day of self-conscious history”; a people “enveloped in the dark mantle of night” (Hegel, 1856, p. 91). It resonates with the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century western anthropologists’ view of colonial education policy when the backwardness of Africa was deemed a burden for the enlightened Europe (C. H. Lyons, 1970, p. 6). The way the policy aims at structuring

and pedagogising education by focusing on primary skills suggests its endorsement of a global hierarchy of labour (Leher, 2004). This hierarchy is also reflected in the choice of a foreign language instead of the national language as a medium of instruction in higher education which a high school teacher described as “the most pernicious vice to the learning of Ethiopian students” (Interview, June 5, 2013).

### ***7.3.1. The use of English as a medium of educational instruction***

The justification for the use of English in the policy is not clearly provided. However, the policy outlines the existence of three tiers of communication in Ethiopian society. The first is local communication which is based upon the local languages of different ethnic groups. All subjects in primary education would be offered using the local language. The second type of communication is national. For this, the child has to study the official language of the country, which is Amharic. At the third level, the policy identifies that international communication requires English. For this, English is being taught as a subject in primary education, and it has become a medium of instruction for all courses at secondary and higher education levels. The educational advantage of learning using mother-tongue languages at lower levels and European languages at higher levels has been promoted by the World Bank (Lockheed & Verspoor, 1991, p. 167). Criticising the approach Mazrui (2000, p. 48) argued that the Bank’s initiative was “a means of facilitating the students’ acquisition of the imperial [European] language at a later stage”. He also shows that at least as far as UNESCO is concerned, the difficulty in using vernacular language as medium of instruction is where “to find money” (UNESCO Quoted in Mazrui, 2000, p 50-51). Because of lending and support conditions “under the World-Bank structural adjustment programs, the only path open to African nations is the adoption of the imperial languages from the very outset of a child’s education” (Mazrui, 2000, p. 49).

The Ethiopian Constitution presents the use of the mother tongue in education as a newly won right for all ethnic members of the country. However, the Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation (HPR, 2009) provides, “The medium of instruction in any institution, except possibly in language studies other than the English language, shall be English” (HPR, 2009, Art. 20(1)). The aim is to achieve international competitiveness in



the globalising world by focusing on the transfer of technology from developed countries rather than to invent it. Tekeste Negash (2010) strongly argues that the use of English as a medium of instruction is detrimental to the national interest. Ethiopia has instruments of education. The *ge'ez fidel* (Ethiopian alphabets) is one of the ancient languages of the world, has a well-developed philosophy and is a repository of ancient wisdom that should pass on from generations to generations (Bekerie, 1997; Isaac, 2007).

The argument in favour of the use of English as a medium of instruction is often presented based on the belief in the existence of a superior international standard. A supporter of this approach who works for the Ministry of Education argued that:

We do not have national standard different from international standard because our national standard is international standard. We need our students to integrate and compete with other students in the world; we do not want them to be isolated from the world (Interview, June 5, 2012)

However persuasive this statement appears, there is no clear definition of international standard. How is international standard related to the national interest? Whose standard is considered to be international standard? Research shows that the use of a global language as medium of learning in Sub Sahara Africa is a myth that prevents the true benefits of education to Africans (Truong, 2012). During my field work, I have gathered mixed responses towards the use of English as a medium of instruction. There are students who believe that English is the means of reaching out to the world from where they were isolated due to poverty and backwardness. However, I have also met a few teachers and university lecturers who considered English as a weapon of colonising the entire workforce and resources of the country as an investment for global investment. A high school teacher criticised the use of English:

They say they want to build the nation. They say they are learning from other countries' experiences. Can you mention any

successful country that is developed using a foreign language? We are not India or Nigeria. We were not colonised by the British. We did not grow up learning, communicating, writing, speaking, and feeling in English. Our folklores, stories, and beliefs are all in our languages. How can we use the English language to help civilise 80 million people who do not speak English? Is this nation building? Our language is our experience. How can you share your experience without using the experience? (Interview, May 10, 2012)

My observation of exam preparation by students clearly illustrates the challenge that students face in using English as a medium of learning. Many students study the content of their exercise books using the method called *shemideda*. This is a form of rote learning, the cramming of every word in a text without necessarily understanding the meaning or the concept behind it. I have met students both in high school and early university who use *shemideda* as their principal method of study. Responding to why a student uses *shemideda*, and would it be necessary to do so if education were in the national language, a student responded:

The teachers translate for us from English to Amharic during class. Because of that I understand the idea but I cannot yet put it in writing using English. I do not have enough vocabulary to express it in the way I understand it, and I could be grammatically wrong and lose marks if I try to do so. If it were in Amharic, why would I come to school in the first place? I would not even need a teacher! I could have studied every book sitting under a tree in my village and come only for exams (Interview, May 20, 2012).

English as a challenge to learning could be seen in a cultural context that does not support the use of the language in daily life. A student noted, “There is little

incentive or value outside the school that encourages you to speak in English unless you want to show-off as an intellectual” (Interview, May 20, 2012). In high school, many students have to spend an enormous amount of their study time looking for the meanings of several words in their English-Amharic dictionaries, which are full of errors and defects. During my field work, I have repeatedly attended classes with students in two public high schools and in Addis Ababa University. The condition of the students in the two high schools is similar. Generally, English is studied not as a means of expressing their ideas or as an instrument of acquiring knowledge as commonly assumed, but as an end for education. The greatest focus on grammatical rules, the vocabularies, the punctuation marks, the pronunciation, etc., are repeatedly explained in Amharic to the students. Students make every effort to memorise the rules without necessarily applying them in their communications. I have observed three groups of students preparing themselves for exams. While working on their English exercises, they discussed every question in Amharic arguing whether it is right to use this English word or that word, this tense or that tense, if it appears in their exams. In their genuine and eager interest to understand it, it is not difficult to notice the distance between the English language as a finished product and the experience of the students. The language is no way near to be used as a means of expressing their own ideas or receiving others’. It is studied as an idea or new knowledge by itself, using the Amharic language as a medium of communicating about it with each other.

The difficulty associated with English is especially visible during class presentations where the embarrassment, the feeling of inadequacy and nervousness that students face hampers communication. In grade 11 and 12 English class rooms, I observed many students making class presentations, asking questions, and responding to questions often by complementing their lack of English with Amharic. One of the clear challenges associated with this type of learning is the impossibility of critical learning. The main concern of critical education is to unravel oppressive ideologies that are concealed in the seemingly neutral body of the language and content of education. It is difficult to imagine the possibility of doing this when the language as well as the content of education is presented to the students as a new product. A teacher’s comment is relevant here:

I sometimes think, by teaching them [students] western ideas using western language, we reduce their level of thinking and communication to that of a western child. They may have large experience from life, but we lock their experience by making English the only exit door for it. Throughout their higher education life, they have to struggle looking for the right vocabulary and grammar to express what they knew. They may feel or think about great things, but they can only speak or write so little of it in English (Interview, May, 2012).

The systematic abandonment of local and national languages from higher education and research, denies the people the possibility of contributing their experience to enrich the knowledge base, and the possibility of producing and reproducing knowledge to serve their lives. This state of institutional extroversion allows a unidirectional flow of information from English to local languages using the translating role of the teacher.

The progressive abandonment of Amharic is even strong among private primary schools that enforce the use of English with strict disciplinary measures. I was informed by teachers that a few private schools in Addis Ababa prohibit the use of Amharic in the school compound with corporal punishment being applied on students who might break this law. Such local practices coupled with the interest of the state to facilitate the “internationalisation” of the system using English as an important instrument may contribute to the “linguistic genocide” some scholars are worried about (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Moreover, the Ethiopian case clearly adds to the argument that an “African child’s major learning problem is linguistic” (Obanya, quoted in Brock-Utne, 2000, p. 141).

In this research, the objection to the use of English should not be misunderstood as a call for a complete avoidance of the study of foreign languages from the curriculum, including English. In Addis Ababa University, there is a Department of Foreign Languages, and English is the major field of study. From the elementary to high school

levels, English is also taught as a subject. I believe the teaching of English as a foreign language both in schools and university is a useful development, and it can substantially reduce the concern over isolation. What is not useful, however, is the use of English for the entire study of all courses from high school to university level. Envisioning the diffusion of science and technology to society without using the people's language, and having a national education system without using the national language as a medium of learning, is a national delusion. It has been argued that the low quality of education has been instigated as a result of "the curse of English as a medium of instruction in Ethiopian higher education system" (Negash, 2010)

### ***7.3.2. The question of quality education***

Quality of education has been highlighted as a major concern by state and non-state actors. It is often considered as composed of "components [that] are often in tension with each other so that to improve one may have negative effects on another" (Barrett, Chawla-Duggan, Lowe, Nikel, & Ukpo, 2006, p. 12). The five components include effectiveness, efficiency, equality, relevance and sustainability with varying degrees considered important to improve the system of education. In this case, relevance is regarded as a component that keeps the education system in alignment with development activities (Barrett et al. 2006, p. 14). For example, relevant education is considered in terms of increasing the number of science students as opposed to art (Saint, 2004, p. 104).

Both the government and its donors believe that the major cause of low quality education is the lack of educational technology and resources, something only donors and the state could supply (Yizengaw, 2005, p. 8). This makes cost the most important consideration for quality improvement. As poor communities may not fund adequate resources for schooling, the cost factor subordinates learning to the whims of the market where the alms of the donors and the role of the state is crucial for access to schooling. For instance, the use of local materials to build schools was considered inefficient due to costs (Vawda, Moock, Gittinger, & Patrinos, 2001). Moreover, policy with due consideration of cost factors has been in place by the World Bank as a condition for lending for the production of text books and other reading materials (World Bank,

2002). Recently, the production of educational materials through international open bidding procedures is being implemented as a progressive step in achieving the international standard. The government had presented this in its quality improvement plan as: “International tenders will be announced for the development, printing and distribution of textbooks and teacher guides conforming to the requirements of the new curriculum” (MOE, 2008, p. 10). Producing text-books through open bidding allows owners of rich publishing companies to provide books for poor countries’ citizens. Critics argue that this practice was imposed by the World Bank and has been fatal for national publishing, especially in Africa (Brock-Utne, 2000 ). Moreover, these practices clearly demonstrate the ideological orientation of schooling: education cannot be improved from within; it can only get better with more supplies from outside.

The Ethiopian education policy aims at ensuring education and training quality and relevance. Quality is claimed to be one of the top priorities of the entire system (MoFED, 2010). Especially, the GTP considered quality critical for the success of the vision of achieving a middle income country by 2015. “As for improving quality of education measures will be taken to address the shortcomings through increasing the number of teachers and schools” (MoFED, 2010, p. 10). Quality is conceptualised as the capacity of the teachers to teach better English, not the relevance of English as a medium of instruction. It relates to the significance of finishing the course syllabus on time, not the significance of the course syllabus itself to the needs of the students. The discourse of quality has entangled teachers and students in a vicious circle of self-disengagement and poor performance. Poor student performance which is manifested through low marks, high absenteeism, and lack of discipline was attributed partly to poor teacher performance which is due to lack of adequate teaching skills and poor infrastructure (MOE, 2010). This approach fastens the students and the teachers alike with the system by relating their performance with internal deficiencies arising from lack of inputs that can be provided by the state. ESDP IV clearly shows this approach as it relates high dropout rates and poor performances of students to poor school infrastructure:

One issue which needs more attention than in previous years is the low quality of school infrastructure, due to a strong reliance on low-cost construction (mainly through community support). This may be one of the factors that explain the low completion rates and the low achievement. More attention will be given for the quality of facilities under ESDP IV (MOE, 2010, p. 12-13).

While school infrastructure may have a significant contribution to a low quality education, there is a fundamental issue that is overlooked here. By conceptualising the problem of education with lack of skills and infrastructure which are at the disposal of the state, the education system escapes the question of its own relevance; it makes its own activities more important than ever, such as providing more training for teachers, improving the school infrastructure, and supplying more education resources.

This effort can also be deduced from the General Education Quality Assurance Package (GEQAP) that outlines the quality problems of the education system and prescribes remedies for its improvement. The solutions proposed recommend increased government sponsored activities, allowing politicians from regional to local administration offices and from Ministry of Education to local education offices to exercise quality assurance roles (MOE, 2008). The GTP further enhances the messianic role of the state by giving significant emphasis on growth (MoFED, 2010). The plan declares that the long term vision of Ethiopia is “to become a country where democratic rule, good-governance and social justice reigns, upon the involvement and free will of its peoples; and once extricating itself from poverty and becomes a middle-income economy” (MoFED, 2010, p. 7). It also presents some “bold new directions” that could help growth. The most important one was “focus on growth with particular emphasis on greater commercialisation of agriculture and enhancing private sector development, industry, urban development and scaling up of efforts to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)” (MoFED, 2010, p. 4). The GTP states the goal of ESDP IV as, “Producing democratic, effective, knowledge based, inspired, innovative citizens who can contribute to the long term vision of making Ethiopia into a Middle Income Economy” (MoFED, 2010, p. 49). It specifically emphasises the production of a

workforce that is demanded by industry particularly the growing manufacturing industry and prescribes that universities accept a quota of 70% natural sciences and 30% social sciences students (MoFED, 2010, p. 49).

It should be recognised that EPRDF has been successful in galvanising international support based on its education policy. The World Bank has declared Ethiopia among “good practice” countries in designing quality education projects that would lead to “successful outcomes” (Vawda, et al., 2001). According to the World Bank, a "decade after launching its 1994 New Education and Training Policy, Ethiopia's government can look back with justifiable pride on the progress achieved" (2005, p. xiviii).

It should be noted that the government has truly expanded the coverage of education. From primary to university level: new schools and universities have been built, teachers trained, and schools and universities have been opened, but this unlimited expansion had significant impacts on quality and relevance (Negash, 2006). For example, an education expert explained that that the 70:30 natural sciences to social science attrition plan is unlikely to be achieved due to very low performance (below 50%) in maths and science at lower classes (Interview, 10 May, 2012). Critics argue that the spiral of reforms that Ethiopian authorities are adopting following World Bank advisors have caused significant contradictions and chaos in the teaching-learning process (Tessema, 2006). Among the graduates, a large number of Ethiopian intellectuals leave the country every year (Shinn, 2003). Consequently, it is argued that Ethiopian intellectuals “ didn’t contribute an iota to the betterment of life of the toiling mass” (Tolossa, 2007). According to Tekeste Negash (2006), the system of education in Ethiopia is heading from crisis to the brink of collapse. One of the fundamental problems is the lack of broad based participation from below. Local Ethiopian policy analysts argue that:

Throughout the history of Ethiopia education, what has been consistently missing is the lack of consultation with stakeholders— teachers, students and parents— on the content and nature of education. Despite the rhetoric, the practice has



continued to the present day, and the policy formulation process has by and large remained top-down. The government continued to come up with policy statements that surprise teachers, students and parents (Teshome, 2006, p. 64).

Despite the expansion of access to education, the absence of a tangible contribution from the sector is a source of frustration for the majority of Ethiopians whose lives still depend on tradition. The education system distances itself from being the cause of this frustration by abandoning tradition and by delegitimising its authority from becoming part of the new discourse.

### ***7.3.3. Education for work and the faith in technology***

The ETP envisions education to contribute to two major outcomes. These are work and the use of technology. Education is envisioned to bring about a “culture of respect for work, positive work habits and a high regard for workmanship” (MOE, 1994). The type of work anticipated is ‘the growing manufacturing industry’, although the contribution of the manufacturing industry to total GDP is about 4%. The major type of education designed to meet this objective is technical and vocational training.

The second important outcome for education is the ability to use technology. ETP envisions to achieve “all rounded development by diffusing science and technology into the society” (MOE, 1994). This diffusionist vision considers that “[t]echnology will free the people”, and allow “impoverished villages to escape poverty by acquiring the needed technology” (Krishna, 2003). During my field work, I have observed that the most important mechanism through which the power of technology is being harnessed is by the use of satellite television (plasma) for academic instruction. Satellite television is used to broadcast lectures directly from South Africa, or via recorded DVDs from South Africa and centrally transmitted from Addis Ababa on all major subjects such as Mathematics, English, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Civics. The rationale behind the use of such technology is based on equity and efficiency: All students will enjoy uniform learning opportunities, and the quality of the standard of their learning would become international. This short cut strategy to an “international standard” has created

an enormous backlash on the quality of learning: the poor level of performance of students with plasma as compared to private schools who do not use plasma (Bitew, 2008); the significant reduction of interaction between teachers and students in the classroom, the frequent power cuts that disrupt transmissions, the difficulty of understanding the English language spoken by foreign lecturers, and the transmission of culturally inappropriate content (Lemma, 2006). A study conducted on the de-skilling impact of this teaching method on teachers noted the following:

This is a debilitating phenomenon in which teachers have been losing control of their practice. Teachers have become simple technicians who look into smooth broadcasts or transmissions of TV programmes. ... Teachers do not plan and execute what they plan. They are mere TV operators. They are simply executioners of what others planned or wanted to happen in the classroom (Tessema, 2006).

The power of technology to bring change has been narrowly defined as the simple ability to operate technological equipment such as a television without having the power to contribute to, or influence, the content and process of learning. The use of foreign lecturers to teach Ethiopian students using a state-of – the-art technology which is satellite television without effective local interaction revives the uprooting effect of Ethiopian education as provided in the previous two chapters. It portrays a nation without centre, without a special message to pass on to the next generation; and a society that needs to tread behind others– copying and consuming what others are producing. Technology is presented as a finished product that can only be bought from developed societies, and education is regarded as the means by which Ethiopians could be integrated into the consumption stage of technological production.

The diffusion of technology to rural places using education could be related to the World Bank's rationale for the expansion of primary education among Ethiopian farmers. A study conducted by the Bank on Education in Ethiopia suggests that literate farmers are more productive than illiterate farmers because each additional year of

primary schooling increased the use of fertilizer (World Bank, 2005, p. 187-188). The study argues that had appropriate technology been used, agricultural productivity in Ethiopia could have increased by 50% (World Bank, 2005, p. 185). Comparing the level of schooling to the rate of fertilizer use, the study shows that farmers with 1 to 4 years of schooling could use 72% more fertilizer than illiterate farmers (World Bank, 2005, p. 188). Based on this promising prophesy and other considerations such as the positive correlation between income and schooling, nutrition and schooling, and the negative correlation between fertility and schooling, the Bank urges Ethiopia to focus on expanding primary education: “universalizing at least four years of schooling as soon as possible, which serves both economic and social goals, while expanding the other levels more slowly” (World Bank, 2005, p. 181).

There is a similarity between the strategy to increase the ability of farmers to use fertilisers on the one hand and the students to learn through satellite television on the other. In both cases, the product is imported from outside the country without the participation of the alleged beneficiaries. All students receive similar plasma lessons, and all farmers buy similar fertilisers. Desalegne Rahmato (2009, p. 147) noted that “the strategy for agricultural development relies heavily on one formula: the provision of a package of modern technologies and the technical and human resource arrangement for providing the service”. In this “top-down and undemocratic approach”, similar agro-chemicals and improved seeds are distributed without the due consideration of ecological and agronomical variations (147). ‘Farmers in effect had no choice, nor did they have a say in the selection of the technologies they were offered’ (Rahmato, 2009, p. 147).

In summary, the policy sustains elitdom by disregarding traditional sources of knowledge from entering into the education system and disabling traditional networks of power from emerging at the local level to challenge elite interests. It focuses on fulfilling the material need of the individual as an end, and creating a work force that is needed for manufacturing which is not the basic means of income for the majority at present. There is no clearly set national ideal that suggests the existence of a national spirit to which individuals could subscribe their achievements to, or a centre upon which they could anchor their lives and gain a sense of belonging and guidance in their intellectual

journey. The immediate visible hope the ETP and GTP portrays is “making Ethiopia a middle-income economy”. But what does it mean to individuals when a country becomes a middle-income economy? During my field study, some expressed hope for a trice meal in a day, others a job where they can make use of their studies, others a sight of a train passing across the capital, others a car and a home. But when asked how this could come about, all point to the mighty hands of the state.

Work within modern institutions is the commonly anticipated end result of schooling. However, the type of work anticipated is not abundantly available and the educational content has little alignment to the reality of the economic life of the country. The problem of gaining relevant knowledge that would result in generating income is compounded by the use of English as a medium of instruction. In this sense, the system provides no basis for cementing the relationship between the students and their society. Instead, it breeds centredlessness, the loss of cultural roots in one’s society, and attempts to reinvent the local as a peripheral extension for the global dominance of the free flowing capital by producing a workforce that cannot be utilised by local economic activities. The vision to become a middle income economy without a clear meaning of what this vision holds to individuals, and aspiring to become part of the current global economic order is a clear expression of the faith of elitdom in Eurocentrism. Moving Ethiopia away from its self-contained historical and traditional existence even when the destination of that move is not clear invites a vision of disengagement from ones place, from the centre that binds society together. The next section elaborates this disengagement on the level of individuals by analysing the effect of the education system on the social life of current Ethiopian students. It considers how the school system allows students to develop identity, social roles and perspectives that alienate them from their place in tradition and society.

#### **7.4. THE SOCIAL IDENTITY OF STUDENTS**

This section focuses on the social world of Ethiopian students. It analyses how western education confers social identity to students in contrast to their local traditions. In particular, it focuses on how students construct a sense of identity, social role, and discourse about themselves and the world around them. The analysis is presented based

on the primary data obtained in the field and argues that the western education system in Ethiopia promotes the alienation of students from their tradition and society by supporting the cultivation of identity, social role and perspectives that make them important supporters of the system of elitism.

#### ***7.4.1. The Construction of student self-identity and schooling***

All of the university students that I interviewed and had discussions with during my field work considered themselves as important agents of change in the country. Almost every student took the mission of changing his/her country, helping his/her family or community, in addition to leading a better life for him/herself. This sense of mission accompanied a strong sense of awareness about the dismal background from where many students came from. Such a humble background is generally described as poverty. Almost all students that I met consider themselves, their community and country poor, and many associate poverty primarily with the lack of education. Education is narrowly perceived as western science, something that can be obtained only by going to school. A university student of foreign language responded to me that he would like to use his knowledge to change the life of his community who are farmers (Interview, June 3, 2012). No subsequent explanations could provide a clear possibility as to how this might be achieved. In every conversation, students enacted the role of a civiliser without a clear perception of the correlation or relevance between their careers and the social field to which it would be applied. The most common answer to the question why do you study is “*sayimar yasitemaregnin hizb lemerdat*”, to help the people who gave me education without having it for themselves’. This response runs like a proverb, and is regarded as common sense.

It is not just students who expressed such views. Some of the parents of students in rural villages, as converted believers in the power of the school, reflect the same view; they blame their inability to go to school as the cause of their poverty. In their view, educated persons are more advanced and civilised than they were even when they knew quite well that the educated are incompetent to produce anything with their hands. A farmer reflected on his failure to transfer his traditional skills to his school going son as:

I use my hoe and painfully dig the soil all day to produce crops.  
But my son could earn more just by using pen and paper. What  
use of him is it for me to teach him to toil on the land?  
(Interview, April 24, 2012).

The students, once they started to attend the school, viewed themselves in isolation from the rest of the community or the family. This process of self-exclusion or isolation starts to manifest itself in the various roles they take at home, in the field, or within the community. I have listened to several student reflections towards their communities, and in most instances, the criticism outweighs the appreciation. Moreover, there appears to be a relative opposite correlation between one's level of study in the modern school and social engagement in the community. The more educated a person is, the less involved that person becomes involved in local cultural life and practices. From the interviews and the ethnographic field work, I would suggest that involvement in manual labour such as farming, clearing weeds, herding cattle and attending traditional festivals declines with increased schooling. Based on my observations and interviews in Lalibela, this opposite correlation in attitude, behaviour and perspective is highly tolerated by parents and other community members for numerous reasons.

First, an educated student brings a sense of pride to his/her family members, and the student is deferred from harsh manual labour in the same way that most authorities were traditionally exempted from working on the field. The common Ethiopian proverb "*yetemare yigdelegne*" which is equivalent to saying, "may I die in the good hands of an educated person" expresses this common view. This means that Ethiopian elites obtain not just intellectual privilege from studying in a western school but also cultural capital that can be converted into various forms of privileges in their familial and local community settings (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In fact, the knowledge that the school confers to the students is a means to power. This instrumental use of knowledge is especially emphasised in students' text books. For example, the Grade 12 Civics and Ethical Education student text book states that, "Knowledge is the most powerful tool in the hands of man" (MOE, 2009b, p. 137). Similarly, the same education text book for Grade 11 provides for the purpose of knowledge to students as follows: "With

knowledge you are powerful, but with ignorance you are weak. ... Knowledge give you power in any given situation. When you are ignorant you become weak” (MOE, 2009a p. 130). It further creates canonical links among fact, science, knowledge and truth; and associates tradition and beliefs with myth. It declares,

Human knowledge is built based on scientific facts. Facts reveal the true nature of reality. Thus knowledge is truth about things in nature. Truth is the proven facts about something rather than what people generally accept. Beliefs that are not true may be called myths. They are not proven to be true through scientific methods of investigation. The basis of a myth is often tradition. ... Knowledge, wisdom and truth are tools to a good life. Today, governments are making use of knowledge to improve the living conditions of people. Myths are unscientific stories that people would like to tell and believe. Knowledge is truth. Knowledge creates the force that changes society (MOE, 2009a p. 134).

In clear contrast to the traditional view of knowledge as humility and wisdom (Chapters Three and Four), here knowledge is presented as a means to gain strength over weakness, truth over myth, and science over tradition. None of these words are explained independently, or defined as theories that explain a particular set of ideas. Instead, these concepts are dimly perceived as spatially located attributes of dissimilar societies, demarcating the boundary between what is traditional and Ethiopian on the one side, and what is modern and western on the other. Poverty is regarded as an internal weakness of those who are ignorant. During my field study and interviews, it was apparent that students considered knowledge as a superior attribute that does not belong to those who do not go to school.

Exposure to modern schooling is the most important yardstick in determining eligibility to public leadership roles that relate the local people to state functions. Positions in local government schools, rural health posts, agricultural branches, administrative councils, adjudicative posts and other government services require some

level of exposure to modern schooling. Irrespective of skills, character or even experiences, a person with a more advanced level of schooling is considered to deserve a higher position in society than a person without it. Consequently, young graduates are often assigned to carry out leadership roles in rural areas. Elders or scholars who graduated from traditional schools are not regarded as fit to carry out formal government responsibilities. This simply violates the tradition of associating age with maturity and experience, as it were elders and traditional scholars who were attributed with social responsibilities.

A person could easily be recognised as belonging to the educated or the ignorant, the urban or the rural, and the modern or the traditional. For instance, the comparison between traditional education and modern education is often made by taking the latter as the originator of true or valuable knowledge. From my research, it appears that this assumption is shared among many teachers, students and even parents. The belief is used to validate another belief, which is Ethiopians have nothing to learn from their tradition. Modern education is often called “*yaskola timhirt*” which means the school of scholars while traditional education is referred to as “*yekolo timhirt*” to refer to the practice of learning by begging *kolo* (semi fried cereal food). In the town of Lalibela, which is considered to be one of the famous centres of traditional knowledge, traditional scholars teach a small number of students usually in their own backyards or near the churches. Government schools, on the other hand, have a large number of students but a limited number of staff. A teacher’s response to the possibility of allowing traditional scholars to teach language and civics in government schools was as follows:

It is true that we do not have enough number of teachers in our schools. Our classes are overcrowded. Each teacher has to teach multiple subjects in multiple classes. According to the government’s quality assurance evaluation report, lack of teachers is a nationwide problem, and it requires a nationwide solution. We know that there are several church scholars around the town. A few of them have opened church schools near their homes and the churches. However, these people are not qualified



to teach in modern classrooms. They neither have the qualification nor the permission to do so. On the contrary, some of the *dabtaras* who spent decades studying spiritual education have returned to us to become our students. If they want to teach in our schools, first they need to undergo studying in the formal education system and get a teaching qualification from the appropriate government body (Interview, May 6, 2012).

What is considered relevant here is not knowledge but its formalization. Irrespective of its importance, knowledge that does not come through the formal channels of the state or state approved institutions is considered irrelevant for public use in the formal systems.

#### **7.4.2. *Perceptions of Modernity and tradition***

In Ethiopia, tradition as an epitome of backward beliefs and practices is often situated in a place. Generally, those who live in the rural areas are considered more backward or uncivilised than those who live in the towns and cities. The term “*gebere*” or “*getterae*” which means “peasant”, or “someone from the countryside” is sometimes applied to insult a person as backward or uncivilised (Interview, 2012). The peasant is often identified with various marks of backwardness such as style of dressing, accent, and place of residence, unhygienic appearance, and a state of confusion with urban etiquette. Asked to differentiate the qualities of a backward person, a student gave the following description

A modern person wears modern clothes and a backward person wears backward clothes. For example, I wear jeans, socks, and shoes. You cannot expect peasants to wear these things. They wear their *kumita* (shorts) without underwear and their *berebasso* (hand-made plastic shoes) without socks. Most of them go without shoes altogether and never bothered about taking shower even once in a year. Their hand-made scarfs, khaki shorts,

superstitions and especially their sticks are their lifelong companions. You cannot isolate them from these things. They carry their sticks wherever they go – the market, the church or the city– and they would not have any hesitation to strike you on the head if they understood that you were deriding them (Interview, May 7, 2012).

The sense of inferiority ascribed to the peasant extends to a specific place. Students from peasant backgrounds feel uncomfortable having to bring their parents to school for fear of being seen by their peers as backward. Moreover, for students who came from poor parents, it is not difficult to understand the sense of anxiety attached with the social pressure of “becoming a modern person” (Interview, May 10, 2012). At the university level, almost no one appears to attend classes wearing traditional clothes that are normally worn by the majority of the rural people. The khaki shorts and shirts are considered typical markers of rurality. The pressure of finding acceptable clothing by modern standards is enormous among students. This pressure is somehow lifted in schools due to the compulsory requirement of having to wear uniforms, although many parents still find it difficult to provide uniforms to their children because of their expense. At the university level, however, the style of clothing is strongly associated with identity and social position. The pressure of having to present oneself as a modern person is enormously difficult. Lack of economic means to purchase markers of modern identity impacts the relationship of students with each other. A university student expressed this as follows:

My parents cannot send me enough money to enjoy my university life. I have to live as an inferior person compared with many of my friends. I cannot go to the cafeteria for anything except tea. I cannot have a girlfriend because girls cost too much money. They expect you to take them to cinemas, restaurants, cafeterias, and so on. I do not have money to do these things. I do not even go out with my dorm mates or classmates because if

you go out with them and they invite you today, then you should go out again and invite them tomorrow. Otherwise, you would feel embarrassed with yourself. That means, if you have money it is easy to get whatever you want, including friendship. Without it, you are almost nothing (Interview, May 20, 2012).

The perception of tradition as the opposite of modernity is not simply a semantic problem even though language plays a key role in it. There are state institutions and practical rituals that constantly operate dysfunctionally by excluding and invalidating traditional values and relationships. These institutions confer value on knowledge, and provide authority for individuals often depending on their level of involvement with modern education. For many students, modernist identities are accessible through education although they are costly, self-centred, and do not involve anything having to do with peasant life. For peasants, modernity is inaccessible, incomprehensible and something which manifests powerful emblems of style and luxury. During my field study, I have observed the reduction or loss of communication between persons represented by these two identities.

Most students who participated in this study expressed that they have very few conversations with their parents and relatives about life, knowledge, science, and civilisation. There are also feelings of increasing disappointment and insecurity that come with high level of competition to get a chance to study in a university, and to later find a job. The unfulfilled promises of education are so haunting that students tend to be estranged from social life (see next chapter). Yet, some could not explain it why it is difficult for them to communicate their feelings and ideas with their parents as they think they should. The situation tends to be common, especially when the parents are rural peasants. Others think their parents would not understand them because the latter are not, or cannot be modern". With or without these possibilities, many students reflect a sense of self-importance that emanates from being 'modern' through schooling. Responding to the meaning of being modern, a student reflected as follows:

For me, being modern means '*yegebaw*', [being aware, being up-to-date]. Someone who goes with the time is modern. You will know more about the world, about other people, and you are not left behind time, behind others. The world changes constantly so must you. People should change with it, otherwise what is the point of learning if you do not change? You will remain backward. Our people cannot change because they did not have a chance to learn new things, and it is too late to tell them to change now. Only their children could become modern if they allow them to go to school (Interview, May 21, 2012).

This response can be contrasted to other responses in a more general description of the role of intellectuals in society. Students usually express their social responsibility as being one of changing the country by teaching the mass population who gave them free education without having it for themselves. Yet, as presented above, some students find it difficult to communicate the knowledge they already have with their own significant others. This conflict between the sense of tradition and modernity could be considered in terms of conflict between traditional and modern sources of authority, respectively. Traditional authority in the household emanates from age and parental authority. The parent or the elder is entitled to discipline, give advice to, and order the child or the young. Superiority based on age extends to relatives and neighbours. By contrast, the modern source of authority is western education. The superior position of modern identity exists only with the inferior position of tradition. The level of distance between the two exalts the former over the latter. In order to assume a higher position of significance, modern identities demand separation from tradition. While in a state of neglect, tradition tends to supply resources of language and meaning that gratuitously reveals modernity as a superior experience. In various discussions between students and peasants, it was often the latter's experiences and views that came under scrutiny. A mature peasant considered young students advanced in knowledge not on the basis of understanding the significance and the depth of the students' intellect but because the identity of the student is known by its distinction from the peasant (Interview, May 21,

2012). Consequently, the estrangement of the student from traditional knowledge and activities is viewed as an instance of avoiding participation in the ignorance embodied in tradition. This perspective has repercussions in terms of undermining the sense of accountability tradition enabled local people to exercise over their leaders as leaders were required to fulfil public expectations to be deserving of their authority.

On the one hand, local accountability is dysfunctional as state institutions are run without the involvement of local persons, and accountability which can be realised only through some form of participation with the exercise of power does not exist. To the majority of rural people, the principles and procedures by which government institutions are designed to function is not clearly understood. Consequently, participation in government initiated community activities such as gatherings, elections, local road construction, tree planting etc. are fraught with frequent defections. A response from one informant seems to sum up the common reason: “We do not participate full heartedly because they have neither our wisdom nor persons whom we consider are wise and trustworthy” (Interview, May 18, 2012).

In the town of Lalibela, I have observed people coming from the countryside every day requiring various administrative services. Communication between a rural individual and a state agent galvanises various signs of power that setup an unbalanced relationship between them. Through the gleam of “modern” equipment and better dressed up staff, the clatter of papers and ringing bells, guards and servants, the modern institution projects not the advancement of the state or its services but the backwardness of the peasant. The peasant is projected as a helpless child who has no idea about what to do until told, who has little expectation of what these people will do next, or what these all articles and procedures are all about. By this very process, the peasant remains as an outsider – sometimes as a curious spectator, other times as a helpless patient who does whatever is prescribed by the “professional” agent. An illustration could be drawn from an interview held with a parent who had appeared before a teacher as part of a disciplinary procedure the school intended to take against the alleged misconduct of his son who was a high school student. While responding to the question of how he manages his son, the father added:

I know nothing about what he knows. I am not like him: I am not educated: I am ignorant. All I know is to plough the land and eat. How can I ask him what he did at school when I knew I would not understand any of it? I send him here hoping he will not end up becoming like me. I was hoping he will be like them rather than live behind the disappearing tails of the cattle (Interview, May 19, 2012).

The only rejection of the intellectual's leadership position in society came from traditional scholars who attach moral character to a person's claim of being worthy of having a valuable scholarship. Here, dualism is not totally ignored, and the power of the modern school is tacitly recognised. However, what is rejected is the validity of western knowledge that does not pass the belief standards of the society. The life of the intellectual needs a spiritual centre, without which his/her knowledge, however useful, is considered to be in vain. A *dabtara*, traditional scholar, reiterated to me his critique of "modern" intellectuals as follows:

Especially you, you know it very well. Educated people can fly in the sky; they can rotate on the earth and eat what is pleasing to their eyes. They have clothes to their body, shoes to their feet, glasses to their eyes, watches to their wrist. They do not have to work hard like peasants. Regrettably, most of them do not observe fasting, and they do not come to our church for prayers, or keep their *mateb*<sup>6</sup> around their neck. What is the use of knowledge if you cannot use it to redeem your soul? The wise Solomon said, everything under the sun is in vain, and the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom (Interview, May 27, 2012).

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<sup>6</sup>*Mateb* is a thin thread tied around the neck of a child upon baptism as a sign of being an Orthodox Christian.

From this perspective, the ethical dimension of knowledge is considered more significant than its intellectual content. I observed that due to the apparent laxity of elites in fulfilling traditional expectations as members of the local community, and also due to their tendency to disregard spiritual beliefs and cultural practices, their unreserved claim to knowledge is severely limited by a sense of distrust that they face among ordinary persons. A traditional school teacher commented on the issue saying, “The personality of a person who stands to speak, speaks more clearly than the content of his speech. Their [the elites’] knowledge is earthly, and useful only for the flesh” (Interview, May 27, 2012). This disregard to the epistemic autonomy or power of the modern school is sometimes regarded by elites as the result of the bad influence coming from the teachings of the Ethiopian church (Interview, May 28, 2012). Yet, given the highly theoretical nature of schooling in Ethiopia, and its imperceptible contribution to the improvement of the lives of the people, it is not surprising to encounter some level of scepticism in the inherent worth of the ideas and values that are espoused by the educated as “scientific”. A typical criticism was laid down by an elder who reflected the following:

My son, let me tell you the difference between the monarchical leaders of the past and the modern leaders of the present. The monarchical leaders of the past treated the common people as their servants because they believed that the latter did not have their royal blood. The modern leaders of the present treat the people as illiterates and ignorant because the people did not go to their schools. The monarchical leaders justified their authority based on the will of God. The modern leaders justified their authority based on the certificate they obtained from the school. In reality, both are different faces of the same coin because both consumed from the people without delivering on their promises (Interview, May 11, 2012)

This was a clearly articulated criticism against the authority of Ethiopian elites. I observed other less articulated resistance including the refusal to make any comments on local elites or the ideas that they put forward, avoidance of official meetings, disinterest in elites' projects or suspicion towards their motives. However, the system of knowledge imposed upon people does not recognise these hidden transcripts (Scott, 1985). Consequently, the people are considered as objects that are voiceless, powerless, clueless, and in dire need of education by intellectuals. As described above, traditional knowledge offers the needed theory, vocabulary, and perspective that help to criticise western elites.

In summary, this section analysed student self-identity, perception of social roles, and perspectives on modernity and tradition. The identity and role of students constructed through the school system could be considered as a contemporary version of missionarism that was explained in Chapter Six. One of the most important points in this section is the sense of detachment from tradition that the students manifest in their social lives. Students express identities that show little attachment to tradition. Rural life and traditional experiences are regarded as expressions of backwardness. Education is perceived not only as a process of mental transition but also a spatial one, a journey from the rural to the city, from the local to the global, and from Ethiopia to the west. Students abandon tradition and struggle to embrace the deceptive promises of knowledge, which is power through education as provided in their textbook.

It is helpful to use the notion of place to better analyse the sense of detachment effected by western education. Place could be understood as an embodiment of tradition, a source of knowledge, identity and experience (Casey, 1993). Both the Ethiopian traditional system and the western education system emanate from places, the former from Ethiopia and the latter from other particular places in the west. Detachment from tradition, as explained above, could be regarded as alienation from Ethiopia as place. However, it also entails an attempt to find a place in the west. This endeavour at attachment to the west could be explained in terms of values, interest, and aspirations that students aspire to achieve as a reward for their education. For example, the desire to leave the country in order to live and work in the west (Shinn, 2003), the passion to consume western cultural and other products, and the denigration of Ethiopian goods,



qualifications, etc. shows alienation from Ethiopia and attachment to the west. The achievement of these aspirations benefits the west. The next section shows the challenges that students face in the process of achieving this attachment with the west as place. Centredlessness, a form of double alienation is presented as an aspect of alienation that arises as a result of separation from tradition and the inability to find a secured place in the modern system which is elitdom.

## **7.5. ALIENATION AS CENTREDLESSNESS**

This section deals with the condition of centredlessness as the negative outcome of the western education system. There are two conditions that bring about centredlessness. The first one is alienation from tradition. As explored in the previous section, students develop a sense of identity, social roles and perspectives that detach them from tradition. The second condition is alienation from modern systems. This sense of alienation develops as students who are detached from tradition fail to achieve a secured place in the modern institutions due to their experience of powerlessness and meaninglessness within the education system. This section analyses the progressive development of centredlessness among current Ethiopian students based on analysis of the experience of students who participated in this study. Beginning with a brief exploration of the theoretical meaning of alienation, it considers how powerlessness and meaninglessness pervade the lives of many students while they endeavour to gain acceptance into and graduate from universities and secure employment opportunities.

### ***7.5.1. Situating alienation as powerlessness and meaninglessness***

Alienation is often presented as a manifestation of a person's dissatisfaction with existing socio-political structures (Lystad, 1972). In the neo-Marxist tradition, alienation represented the separation of humans from their labour. As private property and the division of labour increased, human beings became estranged from their labour, and the product of their labour stood against them. From this perspective, it was argued that the abolition of private property would reconcile human beings with their true nature (Marx & Engels, 1988 ).

Seeman (1959) presented alienation in terms of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement (Seeman, 1959). For this study, powerlessness and meaninglessness are relevant aspects of alienation. Powerlessness is conceived in terms of expectancy: when “the individual’s sense of influence over socio-political events” appears inconceivable (Seeman, 1959, p. 785). This approach points to the relationship between the individual and the greater social order. Seeman (1959, p. 786) noted that the individual expects that “*his own behaviour cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he seeks*” (original emphasis). With alienation as powerlessness, the socio-political space is dominated by powerful forces that do not take into account the dignity and significance of the person. Following Seeman, Finifter (1970, p. 390) defined political powerlessness as “an individual's feeling that he cannot affect the actions of the government”; the values enforced by the state in society are not subject to the influence of the individual.

The second aspect of alienation as meaninglessness occurs “when the individual is unclear as to what he ought to believe – when the individual’s minimal standards for clarity in decision making are not met” (Seeman, 1959, p. 786). In the case of alienation as powerlessness, the individual may understand what should be the right course of action but feels incapable to influence the system. However, in the case of alienation as meaninglessness, the individual cannot choose an appropriate course of action because socio-political circumstances are unpredictable. The individual is left in complete disarray, unable to distinguish the relevance and significance of the available options, and there is hardly any trustworthy socio-political centre that could be identified by the individual as capable of guiding socio-political behaviour and action. The two types of alienation may or may not co-exist in a given situation (Seeman, 1959). Alienation as powerlessness and meaninglessness helps to illustrate the condition of Ethiopian students as they are learning under the current education system. As the following sections highlight, this condition can be further understood as centredlessness.

#### **7.5.2. *Sources of powerlessness***

Powerlessness is reflected in the relationships that subject the academic life of students to the whims and caprices of individuals and institutions who have power above

them. I have observed various circumstances that can show this sense of powerlessness among preparatory (grade 11 and 12) and university students. The sense of alienation as powerlessness is not evenly distributed among high school and university students. The students that I interviewed in high schools express fewer signs of powerlessness than those in the university. The promises of education are not seriously doubted by these high school students. As a grade 12 student noted:

My only worry is how to pass the exam. You know, it is not easy. I am competing against [grade 12] students all over the country [to pass the national examination]. I must work hard, day and night, to get to university. After that I do not have to worry about anything. I will get my degree and make my family proud and happy (Interview, April 25, 2012).

However, the sense of powerlessness among high school students is still significant since students know that they are competing for limited places in the universities. From placement to graduation, powerlessness occurs with the realisation that students cannot change the circumstances that are unfolding before their lives because decisions that influence their future are made by others. But this sense of powerlessness is not necessarily a constant state of academic life. Its occurrence and intensity varies from time to time. It gets serious during and immediately after exams among students, and may considerably affect their lives at that time. There is also a sense of meaninglessness, the inability to predict what exactly will happen in one's academic future, often associated with powerlessness and the impossibility of influencing the outcome. The relationship between these two aspects of alienation and centredlessness can be shown by focusing on three sources of powerlessness, i.e., concern over acceptance to university study, concern over academic results, and concern over job prospects; and, sources of meaninglessness.

#### ***7.5.2.1 Concern over acceptance to university study***

The sense of powerlessness over acceptance to university study arises due to the fact that the assignment of students to particular fields of study is decided centrally by the state. While students are allowed to “choose” their fields of studies, the decision to get their first choice depends on their achievement at the national examination. Those who scored the highest grades get a chance to go to their first choice and those who scored lower grades are simply assigned to any available social or natural science departments.

The number of students who are uncertain about their assignment is always high, and students are powerless to influence its outcome if they are assigned to a department they did not wish to join. This sense of powerlessness appears short lived with the announcement of the result of placement by the Ministry of Education although it may have lasting impacts on the future of many students who are likely to be assigned to economically less valued fields of studies. The most common consideration in choosing a field of study is work. This may not be surprising in a country where economic deprivation is a serious matter. A third year university student articulated this motive clearly during an interview as follows:

What is the point of studying hard if I am not going to find employment after graduation? I grew up dreaming to change my life and the life of my parents using education. But I did not exactly know which field of study was the best for me. The government chose for me what I should study. Now, I am here doing Anthropology and I do not clearly know what to do with it later. But, I am making efforts to pass and graduate. I believe it is better than staying home and do nothing (Interview, May 27, 2012)

Since students are unable to predict or influence the outcome of their assignment at the end of high school, this process contributes to powerlessness and meaninglessness. However, the origin of these two senses of alienation emanate from the nature of the

education system itself. Education does not enable students to develop social roots throughout their school life. As argued in previous chapters, the content of education has little Ethiopian content especially in high school. Consequently, students grow up overemphasising individual economic goals as an end for education. They develop views and values that attach them with elitdom more than with their community or society. As elitdom operates by subverting and subjecting tradition to its own power interests, students become bodies who submit themselves to its disciplining and reproductive power rather than becoming agents for the fulfilment of the aspirations and interests of their communities.

#### ***7.5.2.2 Concern over academic results***

Concern over academic results is probably the strongest of all the other concerns that university students have to face throughout their academic lives. Almost every student I talked to expressed deep dissatisfaction about grades. A student noted, “[y]ou are not judged by your understanding but by your grade only. Your exam result is the only factor which determines who you are because without it your academic life is dead” (Interview, June 2, 2012). For many of the students, the concern over exam results has little to do with the knowledge of the subject matter although they acknowledge that this too is important. Instead, it has more to do with concern over the person who decides who gets what grade as marking is the prerogative of the lecturer. Many students have details of their lecturers’ behaviour, what type of questions the lecturer is likely to ask, whether he/she cares about class attendance or not, and what he/she appreciates or dislikes. This information passes from students in previous groups to the next. In this process, students work towards meeting the imagined expectations of their lecturers. Grades, as a means of achieving this outcome, require a torturous journey towards the mind of the lecturer, and taking detailed lecture notes is one of the ways through which this journey is accomplished.

I have met students who consider lecture notes as the principal source of their study for exams. They copy almost everything the teacher says in class. Those who are unable to take good notes often due to lack of English language skill, or missed classes, borrow and photocopy notes from other students. Lecture notes are not supplementary

resources. I have observed several students' notes– highlighted, underlined and some even fading and torn apart from over use. There are numerous small shops outside the university where students could pay to copy and share good lecture notes and other reading materials among friends. Commenting on a fading lecture note he was holding, a university student remarked the following:

Some teachers do not bother to change the content of their notes. There is nobody above them who effectively controls the quality of their teaching. Therefore, they simply repeat and repeat and repeat their notes year after year and year. Sometimes, they boycott classes without even notifying us. We simply wait and wait for about 15 to 30 minutes and go to the cafeteria or the library (Interview, June 2, 2012)

The concern over grades emanates from the knowledge that the formal system is inefficient and untrustworthy. Students who believed that their mark was not fair, or who thought they were victimised by a lecturer for some reason do not have a trustworthy body to appeal to. Although there is a process whereby the student could fill out a form and apply to the teacher to reconsider the grade, the common outcome is, “No change” (Interview, June 2, 2012). Many lecturers do not return examination papers to their students. They simply post the grade without providing feedback. A lecturer suggested that he would consider any intervention by any superior authority on marking as a violation of academic freedom. The only viable option students have in this context is informal and personal negotiation. Here, most lecturers are generally considered disciplined or conservative as they generally avoid personal intimacy with their students. However, the system has no effective means of preventing those who might abuse their position, and there are some disturbing rumours involving the favouritism and indecency of some of the teachers. A female student remembered her circumstances as:

I knew he did not like me from the start. I had been scared of him all the time, and finally he gave me an “F” in his subject. I cannot

get an 'F', no way! I knew I have answered enough to earn me a 'B' or a 'C'. But marking is subjective. Everybody said, I have to go and talk to him. But what is the point? No teacher changes his mind based on the students' idea (Interview, June 3, 2012)

The concern over exam results is compounded by a lack of genuine communication between lecturers and students. Students appear fearful of their lecturers, and their communication is conducted with acute awareness of each others' status. There are signs that strengthen the divide between lecturers and students. For example, there are staff cafeterias where students are not normally expected to enter and get served even if they pay. Students are expected to regard their teachers with respect and avoid challenging their authority inside or outside of the classroom. Although the practice of respecting a learned person is part of Ethiopia's tradition, in this case respect is not always motivated by admiration but by fear. Examination results are the major factor that makes such a fear a possible reality. An engineering student expressed his frustration about lecturers in an interview as:

They are cruel, they always try to prove themselves right, they always enjoy when you are suffering. In our department it is difficult to get an A in any subject. On one occasion, many students got an A, and the unit coordinator forced the instructor to reduce the grade. For them, a grade is like a precious gold. They try to teach us that what they give us is gold, or money, not a grade (Interview, 27 April, 2012).

Lecturers, on the other hand, appear to choose to avoid students for various reasons. There is a general dissatisfaction with the teaching profession in general due to the low salary (by African standard), lack of transparency in promotion and other administrative issues (Tekleselassie, 2005). Studies indicate that absence of academic freedom and heavy political interference from the government takes the largest blame for academic dissatisfaction and powerlessness (Yimam, 2008). This was especially

clear when 41 professors, including the President and the two vice-presidents of the university were summarily dismissed from Addis Ababa University for being critical of the government in April 1993 (Vestal, 1999, p. 56) and about 40 students and other civilians were shot dead when taking part in a demonstration initiated by Addis Ababa University students in April 2001 (Human Rights Watch, 24 January 2003). Moreover, university lecturers feel that they are overburdened by too many overcrowded classes.

Here, it is difficult to imagine how students could identify a stable social centre in this destabilised social setting. In this context, the issue of centredlessness arises with the difficulty to uphold social values and relationships above preoccupation with survival and personal safety. As students try to get the best results from their lecturers and the lecturers from the university administration, each in their own way expresses grievances that are not useful for a united intellectual effort to achieve social goals through education. The concern over grades takes over the pursuit of knowledge to serve the common good or to achieve a higher goal. Grades become one of the determinant factors for a student's worth to society. This has made learning a painful process for many students. A university student noted:

As to me, this is not a university of learning; this is a university of suffering. You have so many worries that your lecturer does not even consider as a problem. Your tension could kill you; in fact, there are students who killed themselves: one threw himself from the fifth floor in the Engineering building, another hanged himself. There are many who went crazy and wander along the streets. The lecturer, let alone consider that he might have contributed to your problem, does not even imagine that you might have any problem (Interview, June 1, 2013).

Another student also commented:

Usually, you cannot question the teachers' decision. You cannot even try to show that you have a better point than the lecturer. If



you complain, you know, lecturers support each other; the administrator you complain to is more likely to side with his colleague than with you. Besides, there is a general belief that students are less trustworthy than their teachers are, and teachers are unlikely to harm their students without good cause. You just have to leave everything to fate and to their discretion (Interview, June 1, 2013).

It should be noted that there are formal processes of appeal for grievances within department or university administration offices (Interview, June 3, 2012). However, these options are hardly exercised. Students believe that all formal systems within the university operate with powerful informal drives within them— drives that are invisible and impermeable to reason or merit. Such drives include among others, personal relationships, ethnic belonging, and political affiliation. These informal drives are often mistaken as having their sources in tradition. For example, the problem of ethnicism is sometimes portrayed as having its roots in tradition although it has been a politically invented phenomenon to classify, disintegrate, and manage persons based on their social identities (Zahorik, 2011). Many students either embrace this politicised version of reinvented tradition or become estranged from tradition altogether. Either way, the practice leads to alienation and the difficulty to uphold and adhere to either social values or institutional ideals.

The societal impact of this sense of alienation is the loss of Ethnocentrism: the inability to connect with public or cultural institutions based on the living values and interests of the Ethiopian society and the inability to find a credible centre that anchors the academic efforts of the student. Sacrificed to the satisfaction of the expectation of their teachers, devoted to the attainment of grade, the academic effort of the students fails to discover the social centre that should nurture and guide the production and distribution of knowledge. This state of alienation is centredlessness: the inability to become intellectually grounded in one's own society, or in a socio cultural context.

### ***7.5.2.3 Concern over job prospects***

Another influential aspect of the alienating effect of Ethiopia's education is the stress and anxiety it creates on the prospect of finding a job after graduation. This anxiety is exasperated due to the contradiction between the promise and the reality of education. As presented above, education is a promise to power. However, for many students, the chilling reality of being unemployed and dependent on their parents is frustrating. Some students try to avoid this experience by creating attachment with individuals or organisations that have the power to provide employment. The most common way of doing this is by becoming a member of the ruling political party while studying at university. Students mentioned that this phenomenon has become common after the May 2005 national election in the country (Interview, June 5, 2012).

In this study, I have used the notion of historical event to illustrate the occurrence of interrelated changes in the Ethiopian society. May 2005 could be considered as a historical event in terms of triggering various changes in the country. A national election which resulted in the gaining of unexpectedly many seats for a newly formed coalition of opposition political parties was mired with controversy over rigged votes that led to a government crackdown against demonstrators killing dozens of people. Most opposition political party leaders were detained and charged with serious crimes including genocide until they were freed by the reconciliatory effort of a few Ethiopian elders. Then, the EPRDF reclaimed most of the seats that were lost to the opposition. As shown in the Amnesty International Report (2012), laws that diminished the activities of opposition political groups, human rights organisations, and independent press were introduced. Universities and high schools became targets of political mobilisation, and a large number of students started to seek membership in the ruling party. At the next election, in 2010, EPRDF claimed to have won a staggering 99.6% of the national parliamentary seats in the country. Currently, there is hardly any meaningful opposition or student political activism against the government, and a culture of fear has reigned throughout the post 2005 election period (Tronvoll, 2012, p. 282). The search for jobs after graduation takes place under this political environment.

The sense of powerlessness over job prospects after graduation is exasperated by the availability of little relevant information about the job market and the reality of work

outside the university. Students I spoke with had little information about the exact purpose, activity, and location of industries that might utilise their expertise. Due to a lack of transparency and opportunities through the formal system, students try to devise informal ways to have access to employment opportunities. One of the common ways used by students is becoming a member of the ruling party.<sup>7</sup> They believe that becoming a party member will help them either gain immediate employment after graduation or suffer less discrimination when they apply for positions.

A participant in this study explained that students who become party members refrain from criticising the party, or the government. The process of looking for a job by becoming a political party member indicates the level of powerlessness students feel to change their own lives using their professional training. The students that I talked to were reluctant to discuss political issues in detail. The state, being the major employer of graduates, influences the extent to which the promise of education could be translated into individual gains through employment. The students' sense of fear and uncertainty to talk about political issues is a clear indication of more than a lack of confidence in the system of elitism. The system through which the students spent years of study starting from elementary school to university level operates based on rules that are not written in their study books. The formal and informal ways through which the students attached themselves with the system falls short of providing them with a sense of security, certainty, or centeredness. This state of powerlessness also contributes to meaninglessness.

### ***7.5.3. Sources of meaninglessness***

Alienation as meaninglessness takes into account the quantity and quality of information or knowledge that students obtain through their education. Meaninglessness occurs when such knowledge prevents a clear and predictable understanding of the

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<sup>7</sup> Although students call themselves members of EPRDF, technically individuals cannot become party members as EPRDF is a composition of ethnic based regional parties. Instead, students become members of the EPRDF-affiliate political party of their respective ethnic origins. The affiliated political parties have Principal Organisations in the campus that run numerous study cells which comprise more than 25 individuals. They are also represented in the Campus Committee which is the highest EPRDF body in the university. The Campus Committee is accountable to the Central Committee of EPRDF which is led by the Prime Minister.

social and political world resulting in the inability of the individual to identify a clear choice or make informed decisions (Finifter, 1970, p. 64). The content and method of western education in Ethiopia does not provide students with the clear knowledge that helps them make informed choices about their future. Consequently, the information students obtain through their studies become meaningless as they are unable to use it to change their circumstances.

The policy contributes to meaninglessness in various ways. First, students who are separated from their tradition expect to find new information to define themselves and the world around them. However, students' responses show that the information they obtain through the education system is insufficient and irrelevant to clearly understand and predict their academic and career futures. Insufficient information occurs due to a lack of reasonably up-to-date learning materials such as books, internet, and other equipment. In Addis Ababa University, there is a general lack of academic books, journals and other publications. At the time of this study, the big libraries such as John F. Kennedy Library and Law School library have a collection of very old books and periodicals. Students complain that most of these scarce materials are outdated. Internet access is often limited to only one hour per student, and during exams important books are rented out to students only for few hours due to scarcity. The content of the information provided in the student text books and lectures focuses on abstract theories. Due to the lack of correlation between the world of study and work, students gain very little opportunity to test the significance of their knowledge in real life settings. They manifest a general sense of uncertainty and insecurity when they express their ideas using the theoretical concepts they acquired from the school. This is exasperated by the use of English as a medium of instruction and its non-use as a medium of communication.

Students gain firsthand information from their tradition about the social world around them and they feel that the English words and concepts they acquired through their studies do not enable them to fully describe their traditional and cultural experiences. The process of translating concepts, ideas, and theories from English to Amharic and vice versa make it difficult to fully understand and develop a critical approach to social and political reality. In high schools, the use of television broadcasts

can be considered as another factor that contributes to meaninglessness as the communication of information is one way, and language problems are exasperated by a difference in accent between students and the television teacher. The above factors contribute to scarcity and irrelevancy of information that prevents students from fully and clearly understanding the social and political system to which they aspire to belong to. The lack of relevant and effective information to make informed and predictable choices in relation to the modern system leads to alienation from the system due to meaninglessness. Another important source of meaninglessness arises due to the process of misinformation about tradition and history.

The Ethiopian tradition can be regarded as the students' immediate source of self-definition. As analysed in Chapter Three, the Ethiopian tradition provides a sense of covenant nation. Stories, songs, proverbs, and fables that glorify a sense of heroic nationalism are abundant in the culture. The Ethiopian tradition upholds a national history of more than 3000 years, a spirit of freedom and independence from colonial domination, a welcoming spirit to strangers and a notion of ancient civilisation and literature. As shown in Chapter Four, it was shown that the country has a rich legacy of intellectual tradition and the traditional education system offered studies in universal history and philosophy. However, the existing Ethiopian education system follows a Eurocentric interpretation of history that contradicts the traditional knowledge of the students. As shown in Section 7.2 above, when the ETP portrays Ethiopia's past as a legacy of complex problems caused by selfish regimes, it mentions no positive contribution from tradition. The same approach is followed in the way that the study of Ethiopian history is organised and presented in grade eleven and grade twelve text books. For example, the grade eleven history text book credits Europeans for pioneering the writing of Ethiopian history. Although there were local historians long before the Europeans, the text book states that Ethiopian sources of history lack objectivity (MOE, 2006b, p. 4). According to the text book, to be objective is "to present the reality as they really were and in the way they really occurred" (MOE, 2006b, p. 3). The text book argues that since the written chronicles of Ethiopian Christian kings were biased, the objective study of Ethiopian history did not begin until Job Ludolf (1624-1704) founded Ethiopian studies in Europe in the 17th century (MOE, 2006b, p. 3-4). Ludolf wrote the

first Ethiopian history in 1684 followed by other European writers. Ethiopians began to write their country's history only towards the end of the 19th Century. Here, the question why European travellers and missionaries are regarded more objective than Ethiopian writers could only be explained by the Eurocentric view that history becomes objective and real only when it is written by Europeans or from the perspective of Europe (Wallerstein, 1997).

The organisation of Ethiopian history is prefaced by European and other countries' history. A student in grade eleven learns about ancient Egypt, China, Japan, Greece, Rome, Medieval Europe, the Age of Feudalism, the Roman Catholic Church, Byzantine Empire, Islam, Ottoman Turkish Empire, Manorialism, Crusades, and India before studying anything about "the different peoples and languages of Ethiopia" and the Axum and Zagwe dynasties. A teacher commented that the breakdown of Ethiopian history into pieces of historical narrations that are spread out into a sea of information about other countries' histories dilutes the sense of comprehensiveness and richness the subject needs to have. Moreover, the emphasis on ethnic history creates further issues of politicisation as it has ignited more dissatisfaction by teachers and students. A teacher commented on this as follows:

I am not against teaching the history of dozens of tribes in the country. But I am unhappy to see that the emphasis on ethnic history eclipsed the great history of Ethiopia as a nation that was hailed by historians throughout the world. Students need to know the great things that we had in the past. However, the current Ethiopian political system has emphasised a history of ethnic domination in the past, and students cannot understand ethnic history in isolation from the political meaning and significance assigned to it at the present. There are certain terms that were used to write history in the past but are now considered taboo. I can tell you that teaching Ethiopian history is the most difficult topic at the present (Interview, 12 May, 2012).

Students express doubt about relying on the official information provided in their textbooks. For example, civics textbooks provide rich information about the ideal constitutional and democratic rules, values and processes the country is considered to be following at the present. However, students joke on the content of their civics textbooks by comparing them with the practice of various forms of injustices that they experience through their academic and social lives. Distrust about the content of their studies leads to the proliferation of new and hitherto unheard of stories to surface with the appearance of truth. A student expressed resentment towards the content of history text books for failing to divulge the suffering of the Oromo people under the rule of Menelik. The student described this as follows:

Menelik said, ‘let religion, language, and history be one’. He also said, ‘a child who has no Amharic name shall not attend school’. Menelik said this because he was afraid of the rise of the numerous and brave Oromo people in his empire. He also destroyed the religion of the Oromo which was *waqe fatta*, the worship of the one creator under a naturally grown tree or near a river. Menelik said, ‘whoever believed in *waqe fetta* shall have his penis cut off if he is a man, or her breast cut off if she is a woman’. This history is not written; it is hidden out of denigration to the people of Oromo (Interview, May 10, 2012).

As described above the insufficiency, irrelevancy and lack of credibility of information imparted through the education system fails to provide students with sufficient understanding about the social and political world around them. The emphasis on ethnic history and its politicisation through the political process creates a sense of distrust and division among students. This condition produces meaninglessness as students are unable to determine the likely outcome of social and political processes and fail to distinguish the relevant information that could help them to achieve their aspirations.

In summary, the combined effect of the two senses of alienation creates centredlessness. First, the education system isolates students from their traditional roots. It declares tradition backward and barbaric; it initiates a sense of mission and a promise of power to students. Alienated from their place in tradition, students make efforts to seize the promises of western knowledge through the formal channels of the state. Although knowledge is presented as a stepping stone or a promise to power, elitdom has strong barriers that make it difficult for many students to succeed. Consequently, students fall into the condition of powerlessness and meaninglessness. Powerlessness and meaninglessness occurs with the realisation that the formal system is unreliable as it is subverted by the informal motives of those in charge of making decisions, and when students are convinced that they cannot do anything to influence the way that decisions are made regarding them. To be accepted to university study, to be graded fairly and to gain employment after graduation are examples associated with powerlessness. Instead of social goals that are constituted formally, the effort of the students is directed towards fulfilling informal procedures and unwritten rules. Moreover, insufficient, irrelevant and contradictory information supplied through the education system creates a sense of meaninglessness among students. Students fail to clearly understand and critically evaluate their situation to make needed adjustments against the system. While powerlessness promotes dependency on the elite system, meaninglessness promotes despair and distrust towards it.

These two conditions create centredlessness, which is a negation of being centred in traditional and social life. It is the condition of being left asunder from place and from its substitutions, from tradition and modernisation. It involves the subjection of one's effort, identity, vision and dignity to a system that is not regarded as dependable and becoming an instrument of alien values and beliefs without having the means to realise them. This condition of centredlessness duplicates itself to sustain elitdom. Alienated from tradition, students remain dependent on the system as they cannot fall back to regain support from it. The elite system that facilitates the above processes produces docile individuals that are effectively demobilised, individualised and confused. It achieves this by attacking the sources of their traditional identities as primitive, and furnishing a new sense of identity with a promise to power without actually providing



the needed knowledge and process to realise it. In this way, elitdom reserves power to the informal and association elites that sustain this process.

## **7.6. CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I have presented the basis of the establishment of the imitative model of education under the current government in Ethiopia. Imitative education is driven by internal chaos and external pressure. The Education and Training Policy came into effect in the aftermath of the country's painful transition from kingdom to elitdom. After the unprecedented terror and massacre of unarmed civilians during the Derg, and the seventeen years of civil war to remove it from power, EPRDF sized power in 1993, and redefined the country as a federation of people with essential ethnic identities. The constitutional recognition for ethnicity as a means of political organisation, the right to self-determination up to secession, and the attention given to the development of the rural people through the agricultural-led development program, portray the recognition of tradition as the engine of progress. However, this is not true because members of ethnic groups are administered by western educated political elites who hardly manifest the traditional values and cultural lives of their constituents except for political reasons.

It can be concluded that elitdom operates based on its attachment with global actors such as the World Bank in the name of achieving "international standard". It has a clearly stated diffusionist model of education as it aims at spreading science to the society. Knowledge is presented as a means by which the individual acquires power in society. Education is designed as a system through which the individual achieves excellence through competition against other individuals. This approach does not consider the Ethiopian tradition as a possible source of knowledge for education. As presented in Chapters Three and Four, the traditional view of knowledge as a natural gift that anchors the student to the service of a sacred centre of a covenant nation, and the process of education as a search for wisdom to train the senses with humility promoted the ability of the student to be related to society rather than to be isolated from it.

The expansion of the school to rural areas and the opening of a dozen universities during the last twenty years is a commendable effort. However, due to the

ideology with which this effort is conducted, students struggle to cope with the minimum requirements of the system. One of these requirements is the use of the English language as the medium of learning in high schools and universities. Being unable to use the language of their society, and being convinced that their tradition is backward, students become alienated from the tradition that supports life in the Ethiopian context. This state of alienation is manifested in the way that students express their identity and social role in society. The identity of students is constructed in contradistinction to tradition. Student perspectives of modernity are expressed in terms of alienation from place in its geographic and theoretical sense.

Rural place and rural life are regarded as backward; modernity is seen as a movement from the rural to the urban, from the local to the global. Theoretically, place as an embodiment of tradition, history, relationships, knowledge etc. of the people inhabiting the country is disregarded and replaced by western knowledge that has the appearance of universality. However, in reality, western knowledge is rooted in western places. It spreads the cultures, stories, languages, experiences etc. of particular western places, and the benefits flow back to the west. Brain drain, market for western goods, foreign investment, debt, technical cooperation, development projects etc. facilitate this flight of benefits out of the country. The alienation of elites from their own society's tradition and from place presents these activities as purely benevolent and progressive. As demonstrated in the role of World Bank in education policy, the profit motive of international bodies passes undetected due to the lack of internal vision from tradition.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION**

#### **8.1. CONCLUSION**

This is a critical study on the relationship between tradition and education in Ethiopia. It explored, mapped and critically analysed the traditional and intellectual legacy of the country, the historical circumstances that led to the removal of Ethiopian indigenous tradition from the modern education system, and the consequence of this process as reflected in the political and the social lives of Ethiopian students. It also examined how Ethiopian tradition was relegated to the realm of backwardness as a new elite system came to power by overthrowing the ideological basis of the long-standing monarchical political system which was grounded in the notion of a covenant nation, and the administration of a sacred kingdom as provided in the Book of the Kebra Nagast. This last Chapter summarises the key concepts that emerged from the extensive critical analysis that drew upon a range of archival and historical texts, rich ethnographic fieldwork over a two year period and in-depth interviews with students, traditional leaders, teachers and relevant officials in the study.

In Chapter Two, major arguments surrounding the debate on the relevance of education were discussed and it was concluded that the question of educational relevance centred on whether western knowledge is relevant for Africans or not. As indicated in Chapter Two, education based on western universalism ethnocentrism, and other hybrid discourses were reflections directly or indirectly linked with the colonial experience (Césaire, 1972; Fanon, 1967, 1968; Memmi, 1965; Mudimbe, 1988). Discourses of colonialism entail a discursive structure that is about unequal power relationships, and this creates a preoccupation with power, which may be a necessity in a situation of domination, but nevertheless makes the concept of power the most important theme of the discourse. In this context, knowledge is desired to achieve the challenge posed by power, to serve as a means with which domination could be resisted or averted.

In Africa, since western knowledge was presented as the only source of education, power became a source of both threat and hope. As much as Africans aspired to acquire the power of the west, they also wanted routes to escape from its domination. This was demonstrated in Chapter Two. For example, during colonialism, African parents demanded colonial education for their children (Ranger, 1965). Through education, it was possible for Africans to believe that the knowledge of the coloniser was a hope for the liberation of the colonised. Initially, by the initiatives of the missionaries and later by the policy of the colonial administrators, the colonial school expanded, and became a significantly important institutional foundation for the postcolonial state.

The above condition shows the pervasive nature of the consciousness of power. As much as Africans may want to avoid the domination of the west, they also wanted to accept its knowledge through education. Studying about the west, reflecting on its traditions, identifying what is relevant for Africa and what is not, created preoccupation with the west and its power. This consciousness of power influences the way that tradition is understood and interpreted in relation to education. The various discourses about the relevance of education in Africa show that under the influence of consciousness of power, tradition cannot become the actual expression of the people's past and present experiences. Instead, it remains as the expression of the views of elites whose knowledge emanates from their educational sources from the west. In this situation, the relevance of tradition to education becomes the relevance of western views of tradition to the education of Africans.

Defining tradition without the significant influence of consciousness of power entails an original reflection on the meaning of tradition. This also means the rejection of the view of tradition as the opposite of modernisation (Clifford, 2004). As much as western tradition has been the basis of western education, African tradition could also become the basis of African education. This approach does not suggest preoccupation with the authenticity or purity of African tradition, or the romanticisation and essentialisation of it (Semail & Kincheloe, 1999). Instead, it is a conscious move from preoccupation with spaces of knowledge to places of knowledge, from the experiences and stories of the powerful to the particular needs and potentials of particular societies

and traditions. From this perspective, as presented in Chapter One, tradition can be regarded as “the creation of the future out of the past”, and it involves history as “an artful assembly of materials from the past, designed for usefulness in the future” (Glassie, 1995, p. 395). If understood in this sense, tradition cannot become more dogmatic or intolerant than scientism or secularism (Shils, 1971, p. 5).

This study highlights a theory of tradition in the Ethiopian context by relating it to the notion of place. According to Casey (1993), only place can be regarded as the source and the limit of all things. The Kebra Nagast presented the Ark of the Covenant as “the place of habitation” for the Glory of God (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 1). It also declared that “before every created thing, even the angels, and before the heavens and the earth, He created the Tabernacle of the Covenant” (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 7). Then, the Covenant became “the dwelling place of the lord” (Heldman, 1992, p. 224). It was used to represent a place that imparts the ideals of mercy, justice, and humility to the kings. By allowing the dispensation of the Covenant, which is “His mercy seat” and the “habitation of His Glory”, from Israel to Ethiopia, God emplaced His protection and wisdom in the nation of Ethiopia (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 12-17). Here, the consideration of the Ark of the Covenant as place is very important as it brings the establishment of a covenant nation upon a foundation that cannot be destroyed. As Casey (1993, p. 14) noted following Aristotle, “Place is prior to all things. Place does not perish when the things in it cease to be”. Moreover, all the blessings that flow from the Covenant- wisdom, mercy, victory, “rains and the waters from the sky, for the planted things... and the fruits, for the peoples and the countries, for the kings and nobles, for men and beasts, for birds and creeping things” flow out of His “mercy seat”, out of place, out of the covenant nation (Kebra Nagast, 1932, p. 144). As shown in Chapter Three, the view of Covenant as place entails the need to belong to it and to be centred in the nation.

Within place there are more specific places that hold bodies, objects, churches, mountains etc. Such places also allow events, activities, studies and practice, to occur. Casey (1996, p. 34) noted that “to be located, culture also has to be embodied. Culture is carried into places by bodies”. Escobar (2001 ) also noted that, “Culture sits in places”. Here, education as a cultural activity becomes place bound. The way the traditional

education system has been practiced in Ethiopia follows this recognition of place. The church which is the centre of social life in villages is also known as “*debir*” which means a higher place. The traditional schools are also located at specific places, each with its own peculiarities of excellence. The traditional school as place is where knowledge is situated, and to where students as moving bodies travel to acquire it. Knowledge which is obtained for free from such place is regarded as a gift of God, as presented in Chapter Four.

The theoretical conception of place provided above has serious implications to the rethinking of education. It suggests that we cannot know anything without emplacing it first, and everything has to come from somewhere or to take place somewhere, and nothing can be imagined without place. This also implies that we cannot understand time without place, time exists only and in between places; before and after time there is place, but before and after place there is nothing. “[P]lace situates time by giving it a local habitation. Time arises from places and passes (away) between them. It also vanishes into places as its edges and as its edges (Casey, 1993, p 14-15). As mentioned in Chapter Three, in Ethiopia, God is known as “*egzia 'biher*”, Lord of Country, which means Lord of Place. That means, in the Ethiopian tradition, even God is regarded as place, because by his ability to carry the world, he is a place for the world. Events, date, and occasions to be meaningful must maintain links with places. “To keep a past event entirely past, with no possible repercussions in the present, would be to deprive it of its own eventfulness” (Casey, 1983 p. 77). Likewise, education, to be meaningful must be emplaced, it has to be situated or carried to and from places.

In this sense, the relevance of education is the relevance of knowledge to place. As presented in Chapter Four, this theoretical conception of education allows a dynamic flow of learning *to* place and *from* place. Learning *from* place entails learning from the internal qualities of a place, from the accumulated legacy that occurred in the past and stored in the stories, practices and experiences of the present of that place. In the traditional education system, the House of Reading (*nibab bet*), the House of Haymen (*kidassie bet*) and the House of Singing (*Zema Bet*) could be regarded as examples of learning from place. The critical philosophy of Zara Yacob (*hatata*) could also be regarded as learning from place. There is also learning that is carried to place. Ethiopian

traditional scholars who incorporated knowledge from Greek, Hebrew, Arabic and other sources brought various forms of learning to the nation.

It is important to emphasise that learning from and to place are significantly related to each other. The traditional scholars used a methodology called creative incorporation of knowledge to introduce new knowledge to Ethiopia. As presented in Chapter Four, their formula was that learning *to* place should be moulded by education *from* place, and in the process of blending the alien with the local, priority and centrality should be awarded to place. This theoretical approach to knowledge has clear implications for education. The Ethiopian tradition of creative incorporation suggests that the seeds of education are to be chosen primarily on the basis of the nature of the land and the environment, not the quality of the seed which is only secondary to place. Unlike the analogy of seeds, knowledge is not pure and its nature is not predefined; instead, it is made and remade, designed and redesigned depending on the circumstances of and the needs in place. Therefore, place far from an attribute of essentialism, becomes a source of dynamism and change. This view of knowledge as having multiple roots may contribute to epistemological diversity that is needed in the world (Connell, 2007; Santos, Nunes, & Meneses, 2007).

Western education developed in Ethiopia as the negation of the above tradition. The school was established based on the disbelief in the value of Ethiopian tradition for modernisation, and through the imitation of the west as a model of progress. In Chapter Five, a historical event was presented to locate the beginning of this nemesis. For the first time in the nation's history, a European army with great support from internal defectors reached Mekdela, the newly built capital of the innovator king Tewodros II. Unable to accept the humiliation he felt, Tewodros committed suicide, and the British looted the treasury of the country and burned everything that was left behind. Since the occurrence of that historical event, Ethiopian leaders tried to maintain a delicate balance between friendship and enmity with European colonial powers.

Another historical event took place where a decisive battle was fought against Italy at Adowa in 1896 and Ethiopian fighters defeated the colonial army of Italy. Ethiopia was accepted as a member of the sovereign powers of the time. With the ascendancy of Haile Selassie to power, extensive changes were introduced. Haile

Selassie emerged as the new national centre for Ethiopia. Western constitutions, laws and institutional arrangements were copied and grafted on the country and the process of westernisation further intensified after the end of WWII.

The passion and genuine intention of Haile Selassie to expand education cannot be overemphasised. He assigned the task of the education ministry to himself, and attempted to create a personal relationship with the students most of whom were alienated and radicalised through the theory of Marxism-Leninism (Balsvik, 1985). It is possible to imagine that given his Catholic upbringing and western life style, Haile Selassie was more alienated from Ethiopia's tradition than most of the students, or maybe he was unable to reconcile the traditionalism of the crown council and the westernisation of the intelligentsia. The Ethiopian tradition was not meaningfully incorporated into the education system (Kebede, 2008a). The emperor gave full power to Canadian Jesuits to organise a national university college, and he failed to give heed to the advice of his own American expert Earnest Work who recommended a national education policy based more on Ethiopian history, culture and language than that of Europe (Work, 1934). The system soon began to produce unemployment. By the time that the Emperor tried to alter the education system through the Education Sector Review, the time for change had already passed.

Ethiopian students adopted a new messianic vision based on Marxism-Leninism. "Poetry was their chosen medium for the dissemination of their ideas of change" (Admassu, 2010, p. 77). They adopted new languages from alien sources and reinvented Ethiopian kings in the image of Medieval European feudals, and foresaw violence as the only way of curing the ailment of the nation. As Jahn (1961, p. 20) noted, "[s]imply by applying a certain vocabulary one can turn Gods into idols, faces into grimaces, votive images into fetishes, discussions into palavers and distort real object and matter of fact through bigotry and prejudice". Kings were turned into brutal dictators, churches into machineries of deception and spirituality into ideologies of oppression. In short, the tradition of the country was reinvented to justify its exclusion and the exclusion of its custodians from the realm of public power.

As shown in Chapters Five and Six, the change from kingdom to elitdom was not a developmental transition from tradition to modernisation, or from feudalism to



democracy as some try to call it (Milkias, 1976). It is the development of a deep crisis in the social and political psyche of the population— a crisis that has never been mitigated through dialogue, but only pauses with violence and bloodshed that occurs from time to time. Ethiopian students agitated the destruction of the monarchical power, and gained the aid of the military to do so. They marched to rural areas as army crusaders to convert the population to Marxism- Leninism and to teach the people to identify their enemies from their friends and to fight for their rights. They also demanded that the military to hand over power and when they resisted entered into conflict against it.

The outcome was the unleashing of one of the most horrible acts of the century. The *red-terror*, an open licence to kill was issued by the military junta and hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians were brutally murdered. Many of them were killed in front of their parents, buried in mass graves, and more than 3.5 million Ethiopians left the country. It is believed that an entire generation of brave and committed young Ethiopians has been killed, and the country suffered tremendously. The price of this transition was a 17 year civil war between the military junta and the current government. The students who abandoned their classes and entered the forest to rescue power from the military came themselves as military leaders in 1993, and have seized power since then. In 1998, they entered into a border war against Eritrea, a former province of Ethiopia which gained its independence partly through their own struggle and ruled by their own friends of the war against the Derg. The lives of more than 70,000 Ethiopians and an enormous amount of money were consumed for a tragic purpose. This and the entire political development since 1974 could be regarded as a process of detachment from place. Currently, education is practiced under the legacy of this violent history; its quality is described as a journey from crisis to the brink of collapse (Negash, 2006).

Despite positive news in economic growth, it is well known that most Ethiopians languish in extreme poverty. Political systems are configured to express discourses of ethnic identity than economic equity. The ethnic and religious turn was introduced through the current constitution; and nations are created within the country, and nationalities within the nations so created. The preamble of the constitution and Article 46 (2) suggests that there were only ethnic nations and nationalities and peoples who came into agreement to create a federation in 1994 based on “language, identity, pattern

of settlement, and the consent of the people concerned”. One of the most important conditions of their agreement, as implied in Article 39 is the preservation of their ethnic distinctiveness up to the right to secede from the federation if they want to. Ethnicity is not presented as a natural mark of each tribe or a person’s essential identity that existed before the beginning of political life at the national level. Hence, ethnicity is essentialised as eternal and unchanging, and the centre of social and political life moved from the nation to the tribe. Currently, Ethiopia is the only country in the world that constitutionally divided its population along ethnic lines and allowed the right to self-determination up to secession. The complexity of this and related rules that govern identity indicates the invention of a new social, political and cultural field for the exercise of elite power. In a context where the nation as a sacred centre of integration is contested, educational relevance cannot start from place. It starts instead from what elitdom offers to be important. Making education relevant becomes making place relevant to elitdom and its power; it means a complete disregard of tradition.

The exclusion of tradition from education affects not only students who are deprived of the knowledge of their societies. In Ethiopia, elders, priests and traditional scholars play a decisive role in the social and cultural life of the people but their political life is extremely limited. They are excluded from state activities based on the requirement of certification from school. Traditional school students and their teachers gain no support from the state. The students have to leave their parents and travel to distant places in search of a teacher who might be willing to teach them for free. While studying, they have to beg for food in the villages in order to survive until they finish their studies. The government gives no support to their educational endeavours, and public resources cannot be provided to those who are outside the realm of the western school.

Another effect of exclusion of tradition is the avoidance of accountability. In Ethiopia, tradition determined the basis of authority and the limit of the exercise of power. Notions of accountability are embedded within traditional beliefs and practices. Kings had to follow tradition, and respect what the people respected in order to retain the legitimacy to rule. With the westernisation of the state, political power emancipated itself from traditional restraints using the glory of western knowledge, but retained the

traditional subjectivities of the people to itself. This detachment from tradition can be regarded as detachment from the overriding significance of the nation as place, as a source of meaning and validation for action. The main conclusion that can be made about the pitfall of imitating education is the degradation of place as an embodiment of meaning, and the decentring of Ethiopia as a unifying centre of nationhood. For example, the use of English as a medium of instruction in a country where English is rarely spoken shows the low level of attention national values have received through education.

Currently, it is difficult to question the relevance of western education in the country. For example, as shown in Chapter Six, a suggestion on the replacement of English as a medium of instruction with the national language of the country has been dumped as “regressive” by participants in the research. Although students admitted that the use of English has made it too difficult for them to understand the content of their studies, the fear of becoming backward and isolated from the world by avoiding English appeared more dangerous and threatening to them than lack of mastering the content of their studies using their own language. There are two major ways through which place, locality, or tradition is trivialised through the imitation of western knowledge.

First, the local is presented as the opposite of the global as though the global is an ever floating mist with no geographical centre or location in the world. We think in terms of mega theories that are sanitized from local particularities, and forget the idea that “everything is somewhere and in place” (Aristotle quoted in Casey, 1993). This thinking is commonly espoused through notions such as “globalisation”, “humanity”, “internationalism” and others that project a form of identity unconstrained by place. In this study, the vision of internationalism, universalism, or globalism is not opposed. Instead, the application of the significance of place to the understanding of these concepts illuminates the deceptive face of globalism. It can be argued that the global should be the genuine expression of diverse localities. To this globality, Ethiopia, similar to any other place, has her past, present, and future contributions.

The second challenge against place comes from the structural, epistemological and ideological forces that limit the significance of place beyond the local. In this study, the influence of structural adjustments required by institutions such as the World Bank

pressures countries to adopt policies that are detached from local realities. In Chapter Seven, I have indicated the role of the World Bank in education policy making in Ethiopia and other countries (Takala, 1998). A homogenous ideological and political space was created influencing poor countries with dissimilar social and natural contexts to adopt similar types of policies, to implement education in similar ways, using similar languages and similar resources. Currently, a plasma teacher from South Africa teaches rural students in Ethiopia using satellite television and the English language. Although this teaching method is hailed for introducing technology to rural places, the process made the local teacher, the local language, and local issues irrelevant to learning.

The ETP regarded English as an international language. From the perspective of the theory of place, the English language, and the content of learning are rooted in place, particularly the west. Not only the concepts and the tools of education but also the institutions that promote universal education are rooted in place. For example, the President of the United States nominates the President of the World Bank. Policies and programs reflect market principles that benefit strong western states. The institutions and the ideas that the Bank promotes are not hanging in an abstract notion of space that is open and reachable to others equally. Instead, it is rooted in the philosophy and in the interest of particular places in the west. The Bank may procure profit from collecting debt repayments or facilitate the brain drain due to its homogenising influence. This means that it disproportionately allows the flow of benefits not to all countries in the global world but to particular places from where it is situated and controlled as an institution. Therefore, what we have as global actors are institutions that have the capacity to transform diverse places into a homogenous space so that they can operate without being hindered by the specificities of those places. Individuals, by detaching themselves from place and imagining themselves as international actors may only change their places from one to another. Traditions as rich sources of knowledge contained in places of non-western countries are regarded as primitive not because that is what they are, but because that is how the global gets its deceptive all-embracing and all-encompassing face.

The study presented how elitdom uses the education system to facilitate the above process. It is argued that the education system reproduces centredness.

Centredness is presented as the product of policies, ideas, and processes that sustain elitism. It negates the collective and individual identities of students who pass through the education system. The imitation and use of western knowledge with complete disregard to tradition negates the collective identity of the individual. This process takes place through ideas that enhance consciousness of power towards the west. Students progressively develop a sense of individual identity in contrast to their society. Their role as missionaries of change or modernisers is constructed in opposition to the position of their society as collectivist, backward, and traditional. One of the effects of separation from tradition is the loss of resistance against Eurocentrism as “the colonizer’s model of the world” (Blaut, 1993, p. 2) the loss of the people’s “resistance identities” (Castells, 2003, p. 421). Ethiopians had employed their tradition to defend themselves against European colonialism. The notion of a covenant nation, the use of knowledge and authority to achieve wisdom, the training of the human senses with humility, and the use of indigenous knowledge, philosophy, history and generally the use of Ethiopian tradition was the effective defence against the acceptance of western superiority. By disregarding tradition and imitating the western education system, Ethiopian elites prohibited the experience of the people from becoming a source of legitimate power and relevant knowledge. It should be noted that the argument in favour of tradition is not to uphold a notion of timeless and static traditions. Instead, it considers the essentiality of improving, not removing, tradition using education; maintaining the spirit of identity, history and vision among people to allow the participation of society in the process of improving their lives through education. Without tradition, people’s sense of belonging to the system is lost. Without belonging, participation is also lost. Western knowledge by antagonistically dividing social reality separates individual perspectives and disenfranchises identities.

Education is presented as a state sponsored mechanism for changing one’s identity from traditional and collectivist to a modern and individualist self. Separation from tradition invites internalisation of Eurocentrism and the guiding of the self through the enormous consciousness of power. This study has shown that for the majority of Ethiopian students, the sacrifice of tradition does not bring the promises of westernisation. The education system fails by its own standards; creates a sense of

powerlessness as the process of education and the prospect of jobs after graduation are hindered by unreasonable and non-egalitarian rules. The insufficiency, irrelevancy and contradictory content provided through education create a sense of confusion that invites meaninglessness. This means that the loss of Ethiopian traditional values is not compensated by the fulfilment of the self with European values. This failure to achieve a sense of belonging in both traditional and modern systems of identity creates the condition of centredlessness that allows elitism to maintain the realms of its power through the production of alienation as centredlessness.

## **8.2. RECOMMENDATION**

The study suggests that the country needs a redefinition of the meaning and purpose of education in light of the knowledge and experience of its people. This study has shown that Ethiopian elites have drawn an antagonistic relationship between education and tradition with the consequence of making the experience and interest of the majority of the people irrelevant to the system. Consequently, instead of addressing major societal challenges, education has brought about a significant social and political crisis the costs of which are difficult to gauge. This study suggests that redefining education requires reversing the antagonistic relationship between tradition and education.

It is important to acknowledge the failure of education and its social and other costs in the country. It is also important to understand the meaning of tradition from the perspective of the people and based on their lives. Knowledge requires a context that orients its production and determines its effects. Each context has its own historical, cultural, geographical and social, economic, political and spiritual characteristics with some similar to other contexts and others different. Western knowledge is not necessarily antagonistic and subversive nor universal and beneficial to all people at all places. The Ethiopian tradition of creative incorporation is an indigenous methodology that enabled scholars to acquire insights to knowledge from various international sources and then interpret it using their immersion in the Ethiopian tradition so that it can be turned into a usable format for public utilisation. Their immersion in the Ethiopian tradition, or centeredness was their best guide to the production of relevant knowledge to

the country. Creative incorporation could develop to become an indigenous methodology for knowledge production in Ethiopia. This study calls for further research that considers the experiences contained within tradition as an important starting point, and its improvement as an end result for education.

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## APPENDIX A

### RESEARCH INTERVIEWEES

Place	Institution	Occupation	Level	Number
Lalibela	Public high school	Students	Grade 11	5
			Grade 12	5
		Teachers	Grade 11	2
			Grade 12	3
	School administration	officials	-	2
	Traditional education	Students	<i>Nibab bet and kidassie bet</i>	3
			<i>Zema Bet and Qine Bet</i>	3
			<i>Metsehaf Bet</i>	3
		Teachers	<i>Nibab bet and kidassie bet</i>	2
			<i>Zema Bet and Qine Bet</i>	2
			<i>Metsehaf Bet</i>	2
	Parents of high school students	Farmers	-	4
	Elders	Traditional arbitrators	-	4
	Out of school/ graduates	Unemployed	Grade 10 completed	2
			Grade 12 completed	2
			College completed	2

Place	Institution	Occupation	Level	Number
Addis Ababa	Public High School	students	Grade 11	5
			Grade12	5
		Teachers	Grade 11	3
			Grade 12	2
	Addis Ababa University	Students	First year	2
			Second year	2
			Third year	3
			Fourth year	3
	Addis Ababa University	Teachers	Lecturers	5
	Ministry of Education	Curriculum experts	Experts	2
	Higher Education Quality Control Agency	Expert	Expert	1
	Non-governmental organisations	consultants	Expert	2

## APPENDIX B

### INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

**Curtin University of Technology**  
**Centre for Human Rights Education**

#### **Participant Information Sheet**

*Tenayistiligne! Greetings, may you have a good health!*

My name is Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes. I am currently conducting a Higher Degree by Research at Curtin University of Technology. I would like to invite you to participate in the research I am conducting under the title: From Kingdom to Elitdom: Tradition and the Question of Relevant Education in Ethiopia

#### **1. What is the research about?**

I am investigating the extent to which modern education in Ethiopia is informed with the views and expectations of Ethiopian students. For this, I am interested in finding out the ideas, beliefs, values and interests of research participants in relation to education to compare it with the messages and processes of formal education in the country. I also would like to find out the relationship between education and other social activities to draw useful insights about knowledge and power in the country.

#### **2. What steps does the study involve?**

The study involves gathering detail information related to education by looking at the normal activities of students in schools and their surroundings. It also involves gathering additional information through dialogue with teachers, parents and policy makers. I will

listen to the views of students 18 years and above through interview and group discussions. I will ask participants to tell me their personal experiences, beliefs, values and expectations in relation to education. Group discussions will be held among a maximum of ten participants at a time.

### **3. How can I participate in the study?**

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. If you would like to take part in this research, you need to understand the purpose and process of the research and express to me your intention to participate in it. You also need to be 18 years old and above to be able to give a valid consent.

During the interview I will ask you about your current roles and activities in relation to education. You are free to tell me your views, beliefs, feelings and opinions about it. Should you consent, I will take notes during the interview and use voice recorder to record our conversations. This will help me not to forget any of the information you gave me. I will show you the notes I took during the interview to check it, as well as the transcript of the recording of the interview.

### **4. How much time will the interview take?**

It depends on the amount of information you are willing to share with me. I will listen to all of your views as long as possible. However, on average, you may consider to spend about 60 minutes of your time in an interview.

### **5. Can I withdraw from the study?**

Yes, you can withdraw from the study at any time. Your withdrawal will not affect you in anyway.

**6. Are there any risks associated with this study?**

I am interested to learn about your personal educational experiences. If you become anxious due to the information you may give me during in an interview, you should immediately contact me. I will meet with you and also refer you to counselling and social support networks if the need arises. You can withdraw or amend any information you gave me at any time during the research.

**7. Will anyone else know about the information I give?**

The research is conducted under strict ethical procedures that require the confidentiality of any information gathered from participants. Based on this principle, I have signed a confidentiality form with Curtin University and cannot tell anyone anything about you. The information I am gathering will be stored in a locked cabinet at the Centre for Human Rights Education, Curtin University for five years. Only I and my Supervisors Dr. Caroline Fleay and Dr. Karen Soldatic will have access to the information I am gathering. After five years, the information will be destroyed. A report of the study will not include individually identifiable details such as names, address and photographs.

**8. Will the study benefit me?**

The study may not be of direct benefit for you. However, as it aims to contribute relevant and significant insights to education in Ethiopia, it will hopefully contribute to better educational approaches that will benefit everyone.

**9. Is there any remuneration or reimbursement**

You will not be paid for participating in this research. Your contribution to this research will not entitle you to claim reimbursements for costs you might incur such as travelling to the interview.

## **10. Where can I find further information?**

This research has been reviewed and given approval by Curtin University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number ----). If you would like further information or have any issues or concerns in relation to the conduct of the research, please feel free to contact me on 0911624848 or by email: [yirga77@yahoo.com](mailto:yirga77@yahoo.com).

Alternatively, you can contact my supervisors Dr. Caroline Fleay on phone number +61-8-92661678 or [C.Fleay@curtin.edu.au](mailto:C.Fleay@curtin.edu.au) or

Dr. Karen Soldatic on phone number +61-8-92661678, email: [K.Soldatic@curtin.edu.au](mailto:K.Soldatic@curtin.edu.au)

The study is being conducted in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans (NHMRC). Complaints on ethical grounds could be made in writing to Office of Research and Development, Curtin University of Technology, GPO Box U1987, Perth WA 6845, Australia. You may also use phone number +61-8-92669223 or email [hrec@curtin.edu.au](mailto:hrec@curtin.edu.au)

**Thank you very much for your involvement in this research, your participation is greatly appreciated**